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Harlequin Romance®

A CHILD IN NEED

Marion Lennox

âWere you beaten as a child?â Shanni askedâand waited.

âYes,â Nick said harshly.

âNickââ

âDonât you dare feel sorry for me. If Iâm not over it now I never will be.â

âI donât think you can ever be over something like that. Kids can bounce back from a hard timeâbut if they donât think theyâre lovedâ¦.â

âHarry will be okay.â

She hadnât been talking about Harryâbut now she turned to look down at the sleeping little boy.

âI guess.â She smiled and turned back to Nick. âIf you stay on his sideâ¦.â

âHey, Iâm committing myself to nothing here.â

âYouâre already committed.â

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#3662

A CHILD IN NEED

Marion Lennox

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PROLOGUE

âMy perfect womanâ¦â

âYeah, Nick. You must have *someone* pictured in that cool, calculating head of yours. If you were ever to consider marriageâ¦â

âHa!â

âNo, but say your career depended on it. Say you really needed a wife. Who would it be?â Nickâs fellow lawyers were clustered around the bar late on Friday night, and they werenât letting him off the hook.

So Nick thought about itâbut just to humour them. There was no way this could ever be serious.

âOkay. Wife requirements coming up.â He frowned. âAnyone I married would have to be independent. I donât need a wife so she couldnât need a husband.â

There was a hoot of derisive laughter and the questioning intensified. âWe guessed that much. Independent. Okay. What else?â

âBeats me.â Nick gave a mental shrug. This was stupid. Marriage wasnât on his cards at all. But if it wasâ¦

âSheâd have to be really something,â he said slowly, thinking it through. âTall and gorgeous. Of course.â

âOh, of course,â his friends agreed, rolling their eyes. âCat-walk gorgeous.â

âTrophy-wife gorgeous,â Nick agreed. âAfter all, thatâs the only reason Iâd be marrying.â

âAnd smart?â

âAbsolutely. Professional something. A lawyer or a doctor, maybe. So sheâd have her own life.â

âRich?

âYep. Thereâs no chance Iâm supporting any woman!â

âThatâs a bit unfair. You make a mint.â

âAnd thatâs the way I like it. Wealth. Position. Travel. What else is there in life?â

âHow about kids?â they asked curiously.

âYou have to be joking!â That was emphatic. âNo!â

âNow, how did we guess that?â His friends now had their summary. âSoâ¦ Gorgeous. Intelligent. Rich. Independent. Wanting no ties. Cold as ice? Something like you, in fact?â

âAm I cold?â Nick asked mildly, but he knew the answer. Of course he was cold. Nick Daniels kept his emotions to himself. He didnât get involved. Not after what heâd been through.

So this conversation was ridiculous. Marriage for Nicholas Daniels was never going to happen.

Â

âIt must be getting close nowâor has John popped the question already?â

Shanni McDonald laughed and shrugged. They were a strange partnership, these two. Shanni, kindergarten director at twenty-seven, still looked about sixteen. Her assistant, Marg, was in her fifties, but they worked together brilliantly. There was only one disadvantage as far as Shanni was concerned. Margâs age meant she was never backward in asking the hard questions.

So now she was waiting for an answer, and there was only one to give.

âNot yet.â

âHe will. I can feel it. And youâll agree. âCos he has to be your perfect man.â

âI guess.â

âIsnât he just what youâve always wanted?â Marg demanded. âDonât you have a list?â She held up one finger after another. âLives locally and never wants to move. Loves animals and kids. Family man. Loves the country. Has room to stable horses and house half a dozen kids. Your families like each other. Everythingâs right, then. John fits everything on the list.â

âI guess he does,â Shanni said, and tried to stop the note of doubt creeping into her voice.

But Marg was astute enough to hear it. âSo whatâs wrong?â

Shanni caught herself and shrugged. âNothing, I guessâ¦ When he pops the question Iâll be the happiest girl in the world. After all, he *is* my perfect match. Where could I find a better partner in life than John?â

CHAPTER ONE

THE man who just might interfere with her wedding plans wasnât talking marriage now. Nick had other things on his mind, all bleaker than the thought of an unwanted wife.

âI donât want to be a magistrate in Hicksville. I donât wish to be within a hundred miles of this placeâso why on earth am I here?â

It was a good question, but there were sensible answers. Nick Daniels had one burning ambition and one onlyâto make high-court judge. Historically, once a lawyer joined Queens Counsel he could be appointed a judge without leaving the city, but that was hard to do now. There were new rules. No one wanted the country magistrate positions, and there was only one way to force aspiring judges to take them on.

âIf you want the plum job, then you need to do the hard work first,â Nick had been told by the head of his chambers. âPolitically thereâs no other way. Thereâs a job going as local magistrate at Bay Beach. Great little fishing town, four hoursâ drive from Melbourne. Youâre not marriedâyouâve no kidsâno ties to keep you in town. Put in the hard work there, boy, and weâll see what we can do.â

âFor how long?â Nick had been aghast.

âTwo years.â

âTwo *years*!â

âYou never know.â Abe Barry had sucked his pipe and had surveyed his hawk-like junior with the beginnings of amusement. Nick was too darned clever by half. If he didnât get shot of him soon Nick would be edging him aside as chamber head before he knew it. âYou might even enjoy a spot of rustic idyll. You could apply for a county court judge position and stay there for life!â

âIn your dreams!â

âNo. In *your* dreams, and I know you dream of the big one,â Abe had told him, the steel in his voice telling Nick he had no choice in this. âBut thereâs only one way to get it. Youâve had a

taste of magistrate work already so you know the ropes. Now take yourself off to the country and show us what youâre made of.â

âWhat Iâm made ofâ¦â Nickâs hands clenched the wheel of his sleek little sports car until his knuckles showed white. Magistrate at Bay Beach! It was an uninspiring name for an uninspiring place. Nightmare stuff.

Accustomed to big-time criminal cases, now heâd be dealing with parking infringements, fines for illegal fishing and not much else. Though it served as a base for a much larger fishing and farming community, Bay Beach township had less than a thousand inhabitants.

Soâ¦fishing and farms! What qualifications did he have for judging farming or fishing disputes? What did he know of either?

Farms gave milk, steak, or wool which was exported to Italy and returned as Nickâs superbly tailored suits. And fishingâ¦ Fishing produced salmon and caviar. That was the end of Nickâs interest in farming and in fishing. Period.

Two years as country magistrateâ¦ Two years of purgatory! He rounded the headland, still groaning. Bay Beach lay before him, its whitewashed stone cottages glistening in the morning sun. The fishing fleet was coming inâat least, it must be the fishing fleet. There were six boats heading into harbour, and surely there couldnât be many more boats than six in this ends-of-the-earth place?

âIâll go stark, staring crazy,â he told himself. The sea air was blowing warmly on his face but he hardly noticed. His skin was so tanned he didnât fuss about protection, and his deep black hair was combed into submission so firmly the sea air didnât shift it. He sniffedâand wrinkled his aquiline nose in disgust. Salt! And cow dung! Ugh! Give him petrol fumes and city pollution any day!

Another bend in the road and the town limits came into view. There was a petrol station on this side of the town boundary and, on impulse, Nick pulled in. He had to fill the car with petrol, and he might as well do it nowâgive him a few more minutes before he entered this dump!

He pulled up to the bowser, looked idly over at the youth pulling petrol at the pump beside himâand his life changed for ever.

Â

âI need to go to the bathroom.â

Shanni sighed and rolled her eyes as three-year-old Hugh made his life or death announcement. It was Friday morningâthank heavenâthe end of a week which seemed to have gone on for ever.

âMarg, can you take Hugh?â Her assistant at Bay Beach Kindergarten was preparing milk and fruit. This would be Margâs fourth trip to the toilet during reading, and the way they were going milk and fruit wouldnât be ready until lunch-time. But needs must.

Calm and unflappable, Marg grinned good-naturedly, shrugged, and took Hughâs hand. âOkay, Hugh, letâs go. But weâd best hurry. This is a very exciting story.â

âMiss McDonald always tells exciting stories,â Hugh announced. âI tell them to my dad, and my dad says, âWhy canât exciting things like that happen around here?ââ

âI guess pirates wouldnât be a very peaceful thing to have around in real life,â Shanni said thoughtfully. âWhat do you think, boys and girls? Would we like it if a real live pirate climbed through the window?â

âOh-h-h noâ¦â

But as Shanni went back to reading she couldnât stop a vague feeling of regret. *Oh-h-h, no.* Butâ¦

Maybe not a pirateâbut something! Sometimes Bay Beach was just too quiet for words.

I wouldnât mind one very small pirate, she thought as she went back to reading of *Dirty Dickâs Dastardly Deeds*. An image of her John rose before herâkind and placid and as immovable as the Friesian cows he ran on his property. Theyâd be married soon, Shanni knew. All in good time. When heâd paid off the new dairy and had enough to put a decent size down payment on a new home. He had it all planned out.

âJust a very small pirate,â she whispered to herself, and then went back to her bookâwhich was the only place around here that things happened.

Â

It was Len Harris.

Nick stared at the youth beside him and the name was burned into his brain. They were all of two feet apart. No!

Two weeks back, Nickâs junior, Elsbeth, had taken Len on as a duty solicitor case, and sheâd asked Nickâs advice. âHeâs on his ninth conviction but heâs only sixteen. How do I keep him out of remand home?â

âYou donât,â Nick said, skimming through the file and closing it with a snap of finality. âHopeless. Save your talent for something worthwhile.â

âHe probably wonât even get to court,â Elsbeth said morosely. âIâll spend days on this and then heâll skip bail.â

Which was exactly what must have happened. Nick had seen him in his pre-court briefing. Len had been dragged into chambers by his social worker and, like Elsbeth, Nick had thought the kidâs chances of making court were somewhere between zero and none. Len had looked surly, defiant and fearless.

Which was just the look he gave Nick now. The youth stared at him for a long minuteâenough to recognise Nick as surely as Nick recognised himâand then he swore. He threw the fuel hose aside so it snaked away still spurting petrol, he leaped into the Mercedes he was drivingâthat *had* to be stolenâand he spun out of the petrol station leaving a trail of burned rubber behind him.

Â

âHarry, donât you want to hear about the pirates?â Before she returned to reading, Shanni tried one more time to attract Harryâs attention. Harry was three years oldâalmost fourâlike the rest of her classâbut Harry was different. Abused and battered, heâd only just joined the kindergarten after being moved from an uncaring family situation into one of the five homes that made up the local orphanage.

âYou donât need to take him on if you donât think you can cope,â Shanni had been told by the welfare authorities. But of course sheâd taken him. How could she not? Harry was enough to wrench the most hardened of hearts.

Harryâs leg was recovering now from a break which had been poorly tended in the past. It had needed resetting, and because the healing was taking so long it was bound in a fibreglass cast with an inbuilt heel. The whole structure seemed much too

heavy for such a little body.

The child was so smallâlittle more than a baby, reallyâand he was permanently withdrawn from the world. He spent his kindergarten time underneath the furthest table, and if Shanni or anyone else tried to drag him out he kicked and screamed until he was allowed to return. After a month in kindergarten, Shanni was no closer to reaching him than the day heâd arrived.

But still she tried.

âThis is a really exciting book,â she told Harry, but the huge eyes peering out distrustfully at the world edged further back into the shadows.

The rest of her children were waiting. Shanni sighed and kept on reading. Pirates. Pirates and problemsâ¦

Â

âPolice? Itâs Nick Daniels here, the new magistrate.â Nick was back behind the wheel of his car and was barking into his mobile phone. âThereâs a youth driving south into town in a grey Mercedes. Heâs sixteen, a bail absconder and erratic as hell. Heâs seen me and thinks Iâm after him. The way heâs driving heâs heading for trouble. Iâm driving behind him, but Iâve backed off so he doesnât think Iâm chasing him. Heâs turning left toward the coast. Heâsâ¦ *No!*â

Â

Shanni read on.

> *âHe took his cutlass in his hand and waved it fiercely over his head. âGive me all your treasure,â the pirate yelled, and Miss Mary frowned.*
>
> *âYouâre not a very polite pirate. Hasnât your mummy ever taught you to say please?â*
>
> *Dirty Dick glowered and waved his cutlass some more. âAll your treasure, I saidâââ*

There was an almighty smash, and a huge grey car came crashing through the kindergarten fence. Shanniâs book dropped to the floor as the car ended up with its nose pressed hard against the kindergarten windows.

Â

âItâs crashed.â Nick was still connected to the police, his hands-free phone letting him concentrate on driving as he talked. âDear God, itâs a kindergarten. Iâm pulling up. Back off. Donât let any police near. Heâs capable of doing something really stupidâ¦â

But even as he said it he heard sirens in the distance and knew it was too late. Len, sitting dazed and scared witless in his smashed car, would hear the sirens too. If he was capable of getting out of the car, what would he do now?

And suddenly Nick knew. He swerved into the kerb, got out, left his car where it was and started to run.

Â

âChildren, donât move. Marg, stay with them.â Marg had burst back into the room at the sound of the crash and was staring out through the cracked windows at the mess outside. Her jaw was sagging almost to her waist. âCall the ambulance and the police.â Shanni could see smoke drifting up from the engine. If the driver was trappedâ¦

She moved fast toward the doorâand then stopped dead.

A boy was climbing from the wreck. He looked about fifteenâskinny and undergrown, filthy windcheater, ripped jeans, long fair hair that hung down over his eyes. He had a cut on his forehead and he staggered as he took his first step.

Shanni opened the doorâand then saw what he was holding. As she saw him, he saw her. And raised his hand.

A gun was levelled straight at her heart.

âWhat theâ¦?â Her words were barely uttered before she was interrupted.

âDonât move. Donât do anything stupid.â It wasnât the boy. It was a manâs voice, tough and authoritative. Shanni, her hand still on the door and standing as if she was frozen, looked beyond the boy and saw a man behind the smashed Mercedes.

He couldnât be more different from the boy. He was in his thirties, immaculately dressed in smart casual trousers, a linen short-sleeved shirt and a tie that must have set him back a kindergarten teacherâs weekly salary. He was olive-skinned, dark-eyed, and tallâsix foot or so to Shanniâs five-four. His jet-black hair was combed back in city-sophisticate style, and his bone structure was strong andâ¦and male, for want of a better

word. *Very* male.

In short he looked a man accustomed to strength and accustomed to command. His deep brown eyes were creased against the sun, and his words were sharp, incisive and they flicked like a whip.

âLen, donât do anything stupid. Youâre hurt. Put the gun down and let us help.â

âYouâ¦â The boyâs breath hissed in as he wheeled to face him, and his fear was palpable. âYou were going to put me away. You and that stupid other lawyer. Well, no chance. Iâm not going to remand school.â He waved the gun back at Shanni, and his hand trembled. âGet inside.â Then he turned and waved it at Nick. âYou, too. You try anything and the lady gets it.â

His hand wasnât trembling enough. The gun was too steady to do anything else.

There was nothing for it but to obey.

Â

So in the kindergarten there were now twenty-five goggle-eyed children, one goggle-eyed kindergarten assistant, Len and Shanni and Nick.

âLineâ¦line up against the wall.â Len sounded desperately unsure. The sirens in the distance were getting closer. âEveryone.â

âLeave the children on the mat,â Shanni said, in a voice that made Nick take a closer look at her. No fainting or hysterics here, then. Shanni was diminutive, far shorter than Nick, with shoulder-length blonde curls running riot, blue eyes and freckles. She was wearing jeans and an oversized manâs shirt smeared with finger paints. She looked about sixteen, but her voice was authoritative and as sure as an experienced school-marm.

âWeâll sit on the mat with the children,â she told him. âThen you can point the gun at all of us and the children wonât be frightened.â

Len took an audible breath. He really was a child himself. âOâ¦kay.â The gun waved wildly. Outside a siren cut off, and there was the sound of running feet. âYouâ¦â He waved the gun at Nick. âStand just outside the door. Tell themâ¦â

âTell them what?â Nick, too, sounded calm, much calmer

than he was feeling. Fear and guns and tiny children. This had all the makings of a nightmare.

âTell them not to come in or Iâll kill someone.â

âIâll goâ¦â He took a step toward the door.

âNo!â Len was indecisive and terrified, changing his mind in the instant.

âIf you want me to give them a message fast, then I need to go outside,â Nick said calmly. âI canât tell them anything from in here.â

âIâll kill the kids if they come in!â

âI understand, but I need to go outside to tell them that. Now, or theyâre coming in.â He cast a swift glance at Shanni, hoping desperately there were some brains behind the riot of blonde curls. Then he looked back at Len, forcing his voice to sound calm as he spoke to him. âIf you stay behind me, you can keep the gun trained on me while I speak.â

âIâ¦â

âTheyâre coming in, Len.â

âNo!â The boy was clearly frightened half to death. He waved the gun at the room in general. The children were stunned into absolute silence and Shanni had sunk down onto the mat beside them.

And Len made up his mind. âGo out,â he ordered Nick. Tell them what I said. But Iâm behind you. The rest of youâ¦donât move or Iâll kill him.â

And he shoved the gun into Nickâs back and pushed him out the door.

Â

There were sirens screaming from everywhere. How many cops did they have in this town? Nick thought bleakly. Still, noise was good. If the kindergarten teacher had any brains at allâ¦ Let her have one neuron at least.

Â

She did. Shanni knew exactly what she needed to do.

The boy had threatened the strangerâheâd shoot him if they movedâbut Shanni couldnât allow herself to worry about that. Her firstâher *only* responsibility was to her children. Len and his hostage were no sooner out of the door, concentrating on the

advancing police, than she was sending a silent message to Marg with her eyes. Letâs get them out of here!

She had to risk talking a little.

âI want absolute silence!â she whispered to the children, forcing herself to stay on the mat so her eyes were level with theirs. Somehow she had to keep calm. âNot one peep out of anyone. This is a pirate game, just like weâve been talking about. So the order is that you stay quiet as mice and stay exactly where you are until I touch you. Then, when I touch you on the shoulder, you run outside to Marg, just as fast as your legs can carry you. But not one sound, or Dirty Dick will win the game.â

Then, with a final commanding glance at the childrenâdaring them to disobeyâand one cheeky grin to show them it was still funâshe rose, practically shoved the still boggling Marg toward the back door, and she touched Hugh whoâd been standing with Marg. âOkay, run. Hugh, you first. Now Louise. Go! Now Mary! Sam! Tony! Faster. Good kids. Outside, and Marg will get you right away from Dirty Dick. Go!â

Â

Nick took a deep breath. There were police running toward the place and somehow he had to stop them. Somehow he had to raise his voice.

âStop! Right now!â

They stopped, but to his horror Nick saw that two of the police had their guns drawn. Greatâa gun battle with him as the meat in the sandwich.

He needed to talk and he needed to talk fast! He raised his voice and yelled.

âIâm Nick Daniels, and behind me is Len Harris. Lenâs jumped bail after armed robbery charges. He has a gun trained on my back and heâll kill me if you come closer.â He was trying to give as much information as he could in the little time he had, but it was as much as he could manage to make his voice work at all. Let her be moving the kidsâ¦

âI didnât tell you to say who I was.â Lenâs gun jabbed Nick hard in the back and Nick grimaced with pain. âJust sayâ¦ Say, âOne step closer Iâll kill you.ââ

There were three policemen now within listening range.

Theyâd been running but had stopped dead at Nickâs words.

âOne step closer and heâll kill me,â Nick repeated flatly.

âI mean it,â Len yelled, and the gun dug deeper. âNowâ¦ Get back. *Now!*â

Heck, did he have the gun cocked? Somehow Nick had sounded calm enough, but there were rivulets of sweat running down his forehead.

But the police had the message. âOkay. Weâre backing up.â The first policeman held out a hand, signalling the others to stop behind him. âWhat do you want?â

âI dunno yet,â Len yelled. âI gotta think. You give me space. I got all these kids in hereâ¦â

âDonât touch the children!â The closest policemanâs voice rose in fear and Nick looked more closely at the officer. He looked in his thirtiesâaround the right age to have a child of his own in there.

âWeâre going back inside.â The gun jabbed again into the small of Nickâs back. It hurt! âDonât follow. Thatâs all.â

âIâm telling him to let some of the children go,â Nick yelled, dragging back against Lenâs insistent pull. âHe canât keep all of them. Tell him Iâm right.â He was desperately buying time here. Len was staring straight out at the policemen, and his attention was solely on the outside. And insideâ¦

Surely there was a back door in the kindergarten? Surely the woman wouldnât be so stupid as to stay still and wait for this crazy kid to return? He had to give her time.

âYou canât keep twenty-five kids hostage,â the policeman yelled, confirming Nickâs impression. Yep, this officer knew the kindergarten, right down to the number of children inside. He had personal involvement here.

That was good, Nick figured. No policeman was going to try heroics if his kid could be caught in the crossfire.

Were the children moving out? Out of the corner of his eye Nick saw a flutter of movement behind him. A wisp of colour against the building, fast removed. Pleaseâ¦

âI ainât letting any of them go,â Len snarled. âAnd you come closer and I kill them. One by one.â He jabbed Nick again, grabbed his collar and hauled him backwards into the kindergarten.

At first sight, Nick thought sheâd got them all away. There

wasnât a child in sight. But then he saw a neat denimed backside, sticking up from underneath a side table and his heart sank. Surely she hadnât tried to hide?

As Len gave a roar of rage, Shanni turned to face him, her arms cradling a tiny boy.

Â

âYou should have gone.â

âRight, and left Harry.â An hour later, they were seated against the wall as far from either door as Len could set them. Len was standing opposite, staring out through a chink in the closed curtains. Every so often heâd swivel to stare at his hostages, and only now had he calmed down enough for them to dare speaking. For a while there Nick had feared for this girlâs life.

But sheâd stood up to Len as sheâd emerged from under the table to face him.

âI donât care who you are or what youâre doing, but you donât need twenty-five tiny hostages. You have me, you have this man and you have one child.â Sheâd tilted her chin, defiant and seemingly fearless. âAnd if you hurt Harryââ sheâd held the child closer ââthen youâll only have one hostage, because youâll have to kill me, too.â And there had been enough steely determination in her voice for Len to know heâd heard the absolute truth.

Sheâd looked beautiful, Nick thought, stunned. Heâd never seen anyone with such courage. This woman took his breath away. And what sheâd achievedâ¦ Somewhere outside, twenty-four children were being reunited with their parents, with only one remaining here. One emaciated baby with wide eyes and a leg in a cast: a baby who sat ramrod-stiff on Shanniâs lap and didnât make a sound.

If only sheâd been a little fasterâ¦ âWhy didnât you get Harry out too?â he asked, looking down at the child. Surely he wasnât old enough for kindergarten.

âYou didnât give me enough time,â she whispered. âHe was under the table.â

âYeah, right.â He didnât understand, but he heard the note of accusation in her voice and it wasnât only about not giving her enough time. Her accusation made him blink.

âYou blame me for this?â

âYou chased him in here. Of all the stupidâ¦â

âHey, I didnât!â His voice rose, and he bit his lip and cast a wary glance at Len. Len, though, was too busy looking outside at the gathering forces of the law. âHe saw me at the petrol station and assumed I was after him.â

âYouâre a cop?â

âA lawyer.â

âOh, great.â Her voice said what she thought of lawyers in generalâand one lawyer in particular.

âThis is *not* my fault,â Nick said through gritted teethâhe wasnât used to being talked to like this by a woman.

Shanni glowered darkly and held Harry closer. âIâm not listening. I need someone to blame, and a city lawyer with a too-thin tie and expensive aftershave will do very nicely, thank you very much.â

He blinked. For heavenâs sakeâ¦ She wasâ¦laughing at him?

He must be mistaken. Women didnât laugh at Nick Daniels. And women didnât laugh in situations like this. Her attention was back on the child now, and she was ignoring the reaction sheâd had on Nick. Her arms were hugging the little boy, trying to draw his rigid little body into hers.

âHey, Harry, itâs okay. Itâs okay.â She rocked him back and forth as sheâd been rocking him for over half an hour but there was no sound. Was he mute? Nick wondered, watching woman and child. He knew nothing about babies. Maybe all children reacted like this to fear.

âHis mum and dadâll be beside themselves with worry,â he ventured.

âNo.â Shanni shook her head. âHarry lives in one of the houses of the local orphanage. His house mum, Wendy, will be waiting outside, though, wonât she, Harry?â

Silence. Nothing.

âIs he all right?â Nick stared down at the little boy. There was something wrong here, apart from the cast on his leg. He mightnât know much about children, but he wasnât stupid.

âHeâs fine.â Shanni sighed. âAs fine as each of us are in this mess.â She bit her lip and then seemed to do an inward shrug. Retrieving a hand from around Harry, she extended it in his

direction. âIâm Shanni McDonald. And this is Harry Lester.â

âIâm Nick Daniels.â He took her hand in his and found it surprisingly warm and strong. Differentâ¦

She was a very different woman from the type he was accustomed to, he decided, but he couldnât quite figure out why. Or why she made him feelâ¦odd.

Well, at least she wasnât falling into hysterics on him, he decided thankfully. He managed a faint smileâand found her eyes disconcertingly twinkling at him.

âI could say the same for you,â she said.

âI beg your pardon?â

âI can guess what youâre thinking and, like you, Iâm really pleased youâre not the fainting type. We need a couple of cool heads here.â

A couple of cool headsâ¦ Nick blinked. She was implying *she* could help get them out of this messâand she seemed almost to be able to read his mind!

âDonât do anything,â he said hurriedly. The last thing they needed here was heroics.

âIâm not stupid,â she said with dignity. âNot like some people I know.â Then she bit her lip and the twinkle appeared again. âHarry, Mr Daniels might have chased a pirate right into our kindergarten but maybe we should be nice to him. Shall we offer him some milk and fruit?â

âMilk and fruit?â

âItâs what you eat,â she said austerely, âin a kindergarten.â And then, before he could say a word, she raised her voice. âLen?â

Len wheeled from the window as if sheâd yelled, and the gun whirled to point straight at her. To Nickâs amazement she didnât react with fear but with purpose, rising to her feet with Harry still cradled in her arms. No fast movementsâbut determined for all that.

âSit down!â Lenâs voice cracked in panic but Shanni simply shook her head.

âI canât,â she said. âI need to go to the bathroom.â

âNo!â

âThere are no windows in the bathrooms,â she said evenly. âCheck and see. Thereâs only roof vents, and Iâm not that

athletic. No one is.â She smiled, and her smile would have stopped a tank in its tracks. âLen, if you donât let me go, youâll be sorry.â

âIâ¦â

âI bet you want to go, too,â she said thoughtfully. âWhat with all this excitement. Tell you what? Why donât you take your gun and Mr Daniels and Harry into the boysâ room while I use the girlsâ room. You can keep your gun on them and I swear I wonât go anywhere.â

He stared at her, baffled.

âMake as many threats as you like,â she said calmly. âYou donât need to. Iâm promising, and I donât break promises. I will *not* try to escape. You have my word. I wonât leave Harry. But if we canât work bathroom arrangements out weâre going to be very uncomfortable.â

âYesâ¦â He thought this through. âIf you try and get away Iâll shoot the kid. I mean it.â

âI told youâI wonât leave without Harry,â she said, and her eyes were direct and honestâso that even Nick, who didnât trust anyone, trusted her. âI swear.â

And, to Nickâs amazement, Len agreed.

CHAPTER TWO

As HE agreed to almost everything else she suggested through that long afternoon and night. Len might be a criminal with a record a mile long, but he was also still child enough to respond to Shanniâs authoritative school-marming and cheerful smile. In fact, he almost seemed to like it, and, as night fell and she warmed milk for him, he even gave her a hint of a shy smile in return.

âTaâ¦â

âThink nothing of it,â she said, ignoring Nickâs look of amazement. She glanced at her watch. It was almost ten. After a dinner of bananas, apples and milk there was nothing more she could do to make them comfortable or to defuse the tension. âI guess we should all try to sleep now.â

That was too much to expect. âDonât be stupid!â Len clutched his mug of milk in one hand, his gun in the other and stared out into the night like a hunted thing.

Thereâd be scores of policemen outside now, Nick knew, with sharpshooters, police psychologistsâthe works. The police had tried over and over to talk to Len through the long afternoon, but his fear hadnât let him take the first step. The phone was off the hook and he was simply ignoring the loud hailer.

It was looking as if it would be a long, long night.

âYou donât mind if we try to sleep, then?â Shanni gestured down to the mats they used for the childrenâs naps. She had blankets and pillows piled upâeverything they needed.

âDo what you want,â Len almost snarled, and Nick thought, heâs tired. He wants to sleepâbut he darenât.

So Shanni spread out the bedding, two sets of mats three feet apart. Nick glanced down at them and casually pushed them together.

âItâll be warmer,â he suggested, and Shanni looked thoughtful. But she didnât disagree.

âCome on, Harry,â she said, and slipped down between mat and blankets, holding the child close, as if she really did intend sleeping.

Nick stared down at them for a long momentâand then did the same.

There was nothing else to do but sleep with her!

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Weird!

Len had the lights turned off so he could see outside more clearly. Nick lay staring up into the dark. He was trying to sleep on kindergarten mats, for heavenâs sake, with a woman and child by his side. He could feel the warmth of Shanniâher arm was brushing his, and he was acutely aware of every movement. Sleeping with a woman had never seemed like this! Strangely, it had never seemed so intimate.

She was some woman! She made him feelâ¦

No! It was hardly the time to think like this now! Think of something else. The childâ¦

Harry hadnât said a word all day, Nick remembered, dragging his thoughts from where they kept straying. Right to the feel of Shanniâ¦ The thought of Shanniâ¦

Stop it, Daniels. Get a hold on yourself!

Keep thinking of the child. Harryâ¦

Harry had eaten the fruit Shanni had fed him, and heâd drunk his milk. Heâd gone to the bathroom and submitted while Shanni had given him a wash. All the time heâd seemed totally aloof, though his wary eyes had been watching every move anyone made. Nowâ¦in the dark, Nick sensed he was still being watched. The little boy was between them, with Shanniâs arms around his shoulders, holding tight. Shanniâs armsâ¦

âComfy?â Shanni murmured, and Nick grimaced.

âComfy as Iâll ever be. Would it have hurt to have full-length blankets?â He had blankets draped all over him, but with three-foot kindergarten lengths it took four pieces to cover him.

âWe donât get many six-foot students in this place.â Shanni chuckled, and the weird sense of intimacy deepened. But, in the faint light filtering in from outside, Nick saw her cast a glance across at Len. She wasnât focussed entirely on Nick or Harry, then. She was checking their talking wasnât making Len edgy,

but Lenâs attention was all on the outside. It was okay to keep talking. âMr Daniels is a bit big for our beds, isnât he, Harry?â she said softly into the dark.

There was no sound from Harry, but he wasnât asleep.

âDoes he ever talk?â

âWho, Harry?â Shanni gave Harry a squeeze to which the child didnât respond at all. âOnly when he wants toâwhich isnât often. Harryâs just new at our kinder. He hasnât learned yet that weâre his friends and weâre never going to hurt him.â

Soâ¦the kid lived in an orphanage and he thought adults were things to be feared. Nick frowned, stunned into silence at the unexpected, gut-twisting wrench of sympathy he felt for him.

Which was stupid. This wasnât like him. He didnât get involved emotionally! Ever.

âCome on, Harry, love,â Shanni was whispering. âSettle down. Let me cuddle you.â

He didnât. His eyes watched everything, supremely distrustfulâ¦

âIâll stay awake with Harry,â Shanni suggested. âYou try and sleep first. Maybe itâs not such a good idea for both of us to sleep.â

âI think itâs a great idea,â Nick said thoughtfully. They were whispering into the dark and Len seemed to neither know nor care. âThis isnât like the movies. The police know their business, and at least one of the officers out there is personally involved. Thereâs no chance theyâll come storming in, guns blazing. Unless Len makes any stupid moves weâll still be here tomorrow, and heâs not desperate yet.â

âYou know about this? About hostage situations?â For the first time Nick heard a note of fear enter her voice. She wasnât as tough as she sounded, he thought. But, then, neither was he. This wasnât a game.

âIâm a criminal lawyer. Iâve coped with the aftermath of hostage situations and I know the last thing the police will do is escalate the situation. Theyâll keep talking. And waiting. They can change shifts and theyâll act like they have all the time in the world.â

He smiled across into her worried eyes with what he hoped was his most reassuring smile. He watched her face as she thought this through, and the fear eased a little.

âSo tonight Len wonât sleep and tomorrow heâll be overtired as well as terrified,â he went on. âThereforeâ¦we sleep now, so we have our wits about us tomorrow.â

âIt sounds sensible,â Shanni whispered into the dark. âYou hear that, Harry?â

âDaddy,â whispered Harry, and Shanni closed her eyes. It hurt.

âWendyâs waiting outside for you, sweetheart.â

âDaddy,â Harry said, and his voice broke with a tiny sob.

âWhereâs his dad?â Nick asked.

âDead,â Shanni said shortly. âCar accident.â

Oh, noâ¦

He didnât get involved. He didnât! But after that one tiny sob there was nothing else. Harry was holding his grief all to himself.

âHeyâ¦â It was too much for Nick. The child was cradled between themâcloser than Nick had ever been to a child before this. He reached over and touched the little boyâs face, his arm touching Shanniâs as he moved. âDaddyâs not here but I am,â he said, and a part of him couldnât believe what he was saying. âWill I doâjust for now?â

There was a long, long silence. Harry watched him, questioning, and, just as gravely, Nick watched back.

Then, suddenly, as if he could bear it no longer, the massive restraint broke. Harry reached out and put his arms around Nickâs neck. He gave a shuddering sob, clung as if he was drowning, and he slumped onto his chest.

He shuddered once more, gave a racking sob that convulsed his whole body, then went absolutely limp.

And then he slept.

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What sort of man was this?

Shanni lay awake for far longer than Nick and Harry. The boys slept. The lawyer and the baby.

The contrast was almost ludicrous.

Harry, tiny, fair and frail, with his leg in its fibreglass cast and with the hurts to his small body only just fading.

And Nick Danielsâ¦whoever he was. A city lawyer of some kind. He looked lean and tough and ruthless. Len had run from him because he was afraid, and Shanni didnât blame him. If

sheâd thought she was in Nick Danielsâ power, sheâd run too.

He looked like a hawk, she decided. Strong, and not an ounce of spare fat on him. His face was almost chiselled, with a strong jaw line and deep-etched bones. He was so tanned his eyes seemed constantly in shadow, which furthered the impression of an eagle.

And yetâ¦ With his tie undone, with the tiny boyâs arms clinging around his neck, he seemed in some strange way almost as vulnerable as the child in his arms.

That was some crazy thought, Shanni figured. Vulnerable? No! This man was a city lawyer with expensive clothes and looks that would make him stand out like a sore toe in Bay Beach.

Thelma, the local laundress, would have kittens if she was asked to clean his suit, Shanni decided. And his tiesâ¦ The locals had learned long ago that gorgeous fabrics simply disappeared when Thelma got them into her clutches. She loved them and hoarded them as her own. If she ever got her hands on Nickâs tie itâd take all his legal wiles to get it backâand Shanniâs money was on Thelma.

Good grief! *That* was a crazy thought, she figured, and she almost chuckled into the darkness. Here she was, in a life and death situation, and all she could think of was legal battles between a city lawyer and the Bay Beach laundress!

But it was a good thought, she decided finally. It was a brave thought and it was better than going to sleep thinking of hunger and guns.

She closed her eyes and, to her amazement, she went to sleep with a smile on her face.

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When Nick woke, Shanni still slept. He looked across at her in the filtering dawn light and thought how odd that her mouth was curved into a smile in sleepâas if she was having a lovely dream. The little boy was cradled between them and her hand was over him as if sheâd protect him even in sleep. Nickâs arm was around Harry and she was pressed against it. They were twined together as three.

Like aâ¦family?

The thought was suddenly gut-wrenchingly bitter. How would the likes of Nick know what a family was? This scenario was

fantasy-world stuffânot real life.

And real life was intruding. Nick stirred and the fantasy ended right there. Heâd slept with Harry clinging; his neck was screaming its protest and Harry was clinging still. He reached up and tried to loosen the small arms, but Harry muttered in sleep and his hold tightened.

He should pull the child awayâbut he couldnât make himself do it. Somehowâ¦ Instead Nick returned his attention to Shanni, telling himself he needed something to distract him from the discomfort around his neck.

Or maybeâ¦maybe it was that he really wanted to look at Shanni some more. Extend the family fantasy?

She wasnât his type at all, he decided as he watched her. Sure, she was lovely enough, but she was totally unsophisticated in style and much more simply dressed than any woman Nick had ever been attracted to.

She was dressed as a kindergarten teacher, ready for rough-and-tumble with her children. Now her jeans and her too-big-shirt were crumpled from sleep, and her blonde curls were tumbling all over her pillow. There was a smattering of freckles running down her nose, and her lashes were peculiarly dark for one so blonde, but it wasnât mascara that was doing itâthey were long and natural and curled upwardâ¦ Just like her nose. Sort of snubâ¦ Pertâ¦ Young.

She wasnât his type at all, he decided, and why he should lie here staring at herâ¦

She opened her eyes and she smiled, and his gut kicked in. That smile of hers was a real heart-stopper. Straight from sleep, it lit her face and brightened the room around her as if someone had flicked on a light switch.

âHi,â she whispered without moving but taking everything in with wide, intelligent eyes. âAre we still hostages?â Her smile stayed. Where their arms touched was warmâa link of comfort. Or moreâ¦

âYes. Weâre still hostages.â Good grief, it was all he could do to make his voice work.

âBut weâre not dead yet.â She yawned and stretched like a cat under her mound of blankets, and the link strengthened as her body stirred against him. âThatâs something.â

âYeah, great.â Try sarcasm, Danielsâ¦

âWell, it is!â Her eyes reproached him. âTrust a lawyer to look on the gloomy side.â

âThereâs no need to disparage the legal profession.â

âOh, Iâve met some very nice lawyers.â Her eyes twinkled at him, teasing. âAll of them over eighty. It takes them that long to realise theyâre human after all.â

âThanks very much.â

âDonât mention it.â The twinkle peeped out again. âIsnât this cosy?â

âVery cosy.â It was, tooâabsurdly cosyâbut he forced his voice to sound dry. For the life of him he didnât know how else to react. âMy armâs about to drop off.â

âIt must be,â she agreed sympathetically. âBut, Nick, itâs lovely how heâs holding you. Harry hasnât held anyone in the whole time Iâve known him.â

âIâm honoured.â That was the lawyer in him now, being sardonic, but she ignored it.

âYou are indeed,â she said seriously. âIf you knew how hard weâve worked to get a linkâ¦â And then she paused. âButâ¦youâre not local, are you?â

âNo, butâ¦â

âSo youâre just passing through town.â There was no mistaking her disappointment, and for the life of him Nick couldnât stop a weird warm glow stir through his bodyâstarting from the toes up. And then she killed it. âWe want Harry so much to form a bond with someone.â

She wanted someone for Harry. Of course. What else could she possibly have meant?

âYou meanâ¦youâd want me to stay for the kid?â

âIsnât that why women always ask men to stay? Because of the children?â She chuckled. They were still talking in whispers in the near dark and they were almost nose to nose. Over by the window Len either couldnât hear or he didnât care. âWhat else did you think I meant?â

What indeed? There was no answer to that one. The glow diedâbut the link stayed. Her nose was too close!

âSoâ¦ Youâre from Melbourne?â He had this almost overwhelming desire to kiss her and she was talking social niceties. It was as much as he could do to figure out what she

was talking about.

âIâ¦ Yes.â

âAnd youâre in Bay Beach on business?â She sounded politely interestedânothing more.

âI am.â And then he weakened. He might as well tell her. Soon the whole district would know. âIâm taking over from Judge Andrews. Rotating magistrate.â

âRotating magistrate!â Her eyes widened, her eyes lit with pleasure and her lovely smile practically enveloped her face. âThen youâre not leaving. Youâre here for two years. Thatâs fantastic.â

He chewed that over for a bit. âWhy is it fantastic?â he asked cautiously, and here it came. Of course.

âBecause Harry likes you.â

âYes?â

âYes. He does.â Her eyes darkened and intensified. âNick, you mustnât look like that.â She put out a hand and touched the little boyâs soft hair. Harry was dead to the world, sleeping the sleep of the exhausted as his body was cradled between them. Heâd forced himself to stay awake far too late last night, he hadnât trusted anyone, but in Nickâs arms heâd felt safe.

âHarryâs had a dreadful time,â she said simply.

âI donât need toââ

âHe wasnât wanted,â she went on, ignoring his interruption. âHis mother has two children by a previous marriage and she didnât much like Harryâs father. Peter was landed with him at birth.â

âPeter. You meanâ¦the father kept the baby?â

âThatâs right. It was okay for a while. Peter took Harry with him everywhere, and he loved him to bits. Butâ¦almost a year ago he and Harry were in a car accident. Peter was killed. There was a little money from the sale of Peterâs house, held in trust for Harry, so BernadetteâHarryâs motherâdecided sheâd take Harry in again. Onlyâ¦she didnât like or want Harry for himself, and it showed.â

âYou mean she mistreated him.â

âDreadfully.â Her luminous eyes swelled with tears in the dim light. âHe had a smashed leg in the accident and after she took him home she never went near the doctor again. He needed physiotherapy and he never got it. If you knew the condition he

was found in when Welfare finally took an interestâ¦â She took a deep breath. âAnyway, thatâs in the past. Heâs safe now, settled in one of the homes of the local orphanage system. And with you he seems to have finally made some contact.â

âIâm not a contactable person,â Nick said bluntly, and Shanni stared from all of six inches away.

âWhy ever not?â

âI donât like children.â

âCome on.â She teased him gently with her eyes. âYouâve let him give you a numb arm.â

âOnly because I didnât want him howling the place down.â

âLiar.â

âItâs the truth.â

âSure.â Her tone said she didnât believe him, but she was moving on. She glanced at her watch and, as she moved, her arm shifted away from his. He was aware of a surge of emptiness as she did. A link broken that heâd valuedâ¦ But she didnât notice. âItâs six a.m. I wonder how the siege is going?â

âPatiently.â

âTheyâll wait?â

âFor weeks if need be,â Nick told her. âI know our police force. Theyâll wait this out.â Please, he added beneath his breath. The thought of anyone bursting in here with guns blazing left him cold.

Butâ¦ âA week! We canât live for a week on milk and fruit.â Shanni brushed her curls back from her face and stood up, decision written firmly all over her. âGood morning, Len,â she said softly, louder than sheâd been talking to Nick but still not so loud that sheâd wake Harry.

Len wheeled to face them. He looked dreadful, Nick thought dispassionately. The youth looked absurdly young to carry the weapon he had in his hands, and he lookedâ¦desperate. The hands that held the gun shook with weariness.

And fear.

Shanni saw.

âYouâre exhausted,â she said softly. âYou must sleep.â

âIâll sleep when I want to sleep.â Lenâs voice was an attempt at a vicious growl, but it broke in mid-sentence, marking his youth.

âOkay.â Shanni made a placating gesture and sat down on

her mat again. With them sitting Len seemed to relax. As if they couldnât spring on him. But she kept right on speaking. âLen, Iâm really hungry. How about if we order in pancakes?â

âPancakes!â

âThereâs a fast-food outlet on the edge of town. They deliver.â

âYouâve got to be kidding,â Nick said as Len stared in disbelief. âYouâre proposing we just ring up and tell them to drive in through the barricades?â

âI donât see why not.â Shanni smiled her very nicest smile at Lenâthe smile Nick was beginning not to trust. It could make a man do strange things, that smile. âMy brotherâs a policeman. Heâs out there somewhere. If I talked to him I reckon we could swing it.â

âNo!â

âPancakes and maple syrup and hot chocolate,â she said beguilingly. âSteaming hotâ¦â

Len could well have eaten nothing the day before, Nick figured then, watching the look of raw need flash across his face. He must have stolen the car on Thursday night and maybe heâd been on the run ever since. Heâd had one glass of milk last night, and all that was left was fruit, cold and unappealing.

âI can do this safely,â Shanni assured him. Then she paused, sneezed, grabbed a tissue from her sleeve and sneezed again. She grinned as she emerged from her tissue. âSorry, guys. Hay fever. Itâs that time of the year. Anywayâ¦â She sneezed again and reassembled. Honestly, she was incorrigible. âJust let me phone and you can listen to every word I say.â

She gave Len a happy grin, as if he was a friend, and then she sneezed again for good measure. One more sneeze and she was back to entreaty.

âHey, Len, if you donât like what I do you can shoot me in the toeâand itâs not every day I offer a toe. Iâm very attached to my toes.â

Len glared.

Shanni sneezed again. She sniffed and recovered and smiled once more. Her very nicest smileâ¦

âLen, Iâm just a kindergarten teacher with hay fever,â she said, and the lawyer in Nick made him stare. If he heard this

innocent little voice in a witness box heâd know she was lying through her teeth. But Len was no lawyer and she had him dazzled. âIâm not some hotshot lawyer with brains like my friend, here,â she said, waif-like. âAll Iâm saying is that weâre hungry and I can organise us a great breakfast. But youâll have to trust me.â

He still glared.

Shanni sneezed. She looked so innocent, Nick thought. Sheâd pulled off her trainers, she was barefooted, fresh from sleep, and her curls were unbrushed and tangling around her face. She sneezed again and he wondered how on earth sheâd ever got this job. In charge of a kindergarten? She didnât look as if she should be in charge of anything. Butâ¦there was this tiny twinkle behind her eyes that he mistrustedâ¦

âSorry. Drat my stupid hay fever,â she said weakly. âLate springâs my worst season. Theyâre cutting hay all around the town and mornings are dreadful. And Iâm so hungry. Len, please let me ring my brother. You can listen to every word.â

The room held its breath.

And finally Len nodded. Between pancakes, sneezes and smiles he seemed bewitched. As Nick was.

âOkay. Be fast. And Iâm listening.â

Shanni smiled. She sneezed once more and crossed to the phone.

And the twinkle stayed.

âHello?â She dialled emergency and to her relief it took her straight through to the command post outside. They must have had the line rigged so every call was monitored.

âPolice here.â

âItâs Shanni McDonald,â she said.

âShanniâ¦â She recognised the voice of the local police inspector, and it was hoarse with worry. A siege like this must be every policemanâs nightmare. âAre you okay, lass?â

âWeâre fine.â Len nudged her in the ribs with the gun. On the mat Harry stirred in Nickâs arms and Nick sat up, cradling the child against him. They looked sort of cute, Shanni thought, looking across at the out-of-town magistrate and his babyâbefore concentrating carefully on sneezing again. Some things were important. Apart from cute lawyersâ¦

And Lenâs patience was running out. The gun dug into her

ribs, harder this time, and she turned her attention back to what she was doing.

âInspector, weâre very hungry,â she said. âAll of us.â

âI can understand that.â

âYouâre not planning on starving us out?â

âTell us what you want.â

She took a deep breath. âPancakes,â she said. âHot food and plenty of it. We thought fast-food pancakes, maple syrup, and hot chocolate. From Donâs Diner.â

âWe can do that. How will we get it in?â

âHave someone put it on the doorstep. Len wonât shoot anyone carrying pancakes, will you, Len?â The youth was listening to every word being said, standing right against her as she talked while the gun stayed pressed into her side. She sneezed and he backed off a bit.

âInspectorâ¦?â

âYes.â

âI need my hay fever pills,â she added. âRob will know. The strong night ones.â

âI didnât say anything about noâ¦â Len started, but Shanni sneezed again. She gave him an apologetic smile.

âPlease?â she said nicely, and he grimaced.

âOkay,â he snapped. âAnd tell him I want a helicopter.â

âThat might be harder than pancakes and hay fever pills,â Shanni said mildly, and Len swore and grabbed the phone.

âI want a helicopter,â he told the policeman. âTo get me away from here.â

âYouâll leave the hostages behind?â The inspectorâs voice was carrying and Shanni could hear every word.

âTheyâll come with me. Iâll dump them where Iâm going.â

âItâll take time to organise,â the policeman said urgently. âMaybe all day. Thereâs been a storm north of here and emergency services are stretched.â

âA helicopter by tonight or someone gets it.â

âIâll try.â

âAnd get them pancakes.â Len crashed the phone back on the cradle and went back to staring out the window. While Nick watched Shanni. Whoâd forgotten to sneezeâ¦

âAre we having pancakes?â Harry asked, rubbing his sleepy

eyes, and Nick nodded and gave him an impulsive hug. When really he wanted to hug Shanni.

âThanks to your clever kindergarten teacher we might well be having pancakes.â Then, as Shanni sat down beside them again, Nick lowered his voice so only she could hear and said, âAnd hay fever tablets to boot. How about that? If youâre thinking what Iâm thinking, Shanni McDonald, that could make us all feel very much better!â

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The pancakes arrived and were delicious, though for the life of him Nick couldnât urge Harry from his knee. Shanni fed him his pancakes in pieces like a little bird, and every time Nick tried to put him aside the child forgot about food and turned and clung.

Nick found it claustrophobicâand Shanniâs delighted smile made it worse.

âI donât like children,â Nick said through gritted teeth, and she chuckled.

âYeah, right. I can see that. But you donât have to like children. Just Harry.â

And Len? Len ate his pancakes as if he hadnât seen food for a week. Shanni had opened the door and pulled the tray inside and Len had fallen on it as if all his Christmases had come at once. Luckily whoever had organised it had decided to provide enough to feed the teeming masses; otherwise thereâd have been none for anyone else.

âThat was wonderful,â Shanni said after her third pancake. She sneezed as she carried the litter back to the bench and fetched the mugs of hot chocolate. âAnd whatâs coming is better still.â She twisted the cap off the bottle of hay fever pills. âMy pills! Sorry guys. Now I can stop sneezing.â

She carried mugs of hot chocolate over to Nick and Harry, and then to Len at his watching post by the window.

âThank you for letting us eat,â she said softly, smiling down at him. âIt was kind.â

âYeahâ¦all right.â He looked longingly at the chocolate. It was thick and creamy with a melting marshmallow floating on top, but the sight disturbed him. âWe shoulda got coffee. Coffeeâd keep us awake.â

âIâm sorry.â She sounded so contrite it was pathetic. âIf you donât want this, Iâm sure Harry would like two mugs.â

âIâll drink it,â he snapped. âGo away.â

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âHot chocolate.â Nick looked thoughtful as he sipped. âNow, why didnât you order coffee, Shanni McDonald?â

âWe have coffee here for Marg and I to use.â

âInstant.â His tone said what he thought of that.

âThis isnât metropolitan Melbourne,â she snapped. âYouâve come a long way from cappuccino society here.â

âI understand that.â He grimaced. He certainly had. âBut Iâd assume your fast-food chain provides decent coffee. Not as sweet, of course. Or maybeâ¦â He cast a glance at Len, whoâd drained his chocolate and was back staring intently out of the window. âMaybe not as disguising?â

âJust drink your chocolate and shut up,â Shanni snapped.

âAnd wait and see?â

âAnd wait and see.â

âYour sneeze seems to have stopped. Those pills must be very effective.â

âI do hope so,â she said simplyâand waited.

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They waited an hour.

Len was rocking on his stool by the window. The curtains were still drawn and Shanni hadnât turned on the light.

âItâs cosier in the almost dark,â she said, and lay on her back and told Harry the story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

Still within the safety of Nickâs arms, Harry listened and Shanni thought it was the first time sheâd ever known Harry to listen at all.

She held her breath and waited.

And it wasnât just the pills she was waiting onâ¦

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It was strange, Nick decided. Surrealistic. For Nick, accustomed to living life at full speed, to be forced to lie and hold a child and listen to the exploits of a make-believe caterpillarâ¦ Heâd never

done such a thing in his life.

The whole world held its breath.

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Over at the window, Shanni could sense Len was listening too. And waiting. She made her voice calm and warm and even and when Harry dropped off to sleep again she wasnât surprised.

What did surprise her was Nick. Gently he disengaged Harryâs clutching fingers, let the little one slip sideways onto the pillows and then, with a questioning look at Shanniâa âhelp-me-with-thisâ lookâhe rose and crossed steadily to Len at the window. Shanni watched him every step of the way, her hand coming down to cradle Harry so he wouldnât notice Nickâs absence.

âLen?â Nick said softly.

His head jerked up. He was so close to sleepâ¦ âYes?â

âYouâre cold, boy.â He pushed the reading chair forwardâthe only comfortable chair in the kindergarten. It was padded, with a high back, and he tossed a couple of cushions on for good measure. âIt might take hours for the helicopter to arrive. If youâre not comfortable your muscles might cramp up and youâll fall off your stool. Use this one.â He pushed the chair against the window. Then, as Len hesitated, he threw a couple of blankets on top.

âMake yourself comfortable,â he suggested.

âWhy are you doing this?â Lenâs face was all suspicion.

âIf you fall off the stool, chances are that gun will go off,â Nick said bluntly. âThen youâll have every cop in the country storming in. Neither of us wants that.â And then he grinned. âAnd you let us have pancakes.â

His smile was beguilingâeven Shanni was beguiled, for heavenâs sake, and this man was a lawyer!âand it worked a treat. Len didnât answerâhe glaredâbut he grudgingly moved from his hard stool to the comfortable chair. And when Nick offered blankets, he threw them over his knees and almost managed a smile of thanks.

âItâll get better,â Nick said, and Shanni practically gaped in astonishment at the sympathy in his voice. âThis isnât the end of the world, you know.â

âWhat would you know about it?â Defianceâbut also fear.

âI know you havenât killed anyone. I know youâre young and young offenders donât go to jail. They go to remand homes where, if they want, they can learn a trade. I know thereâs a heart under that tough exteriorâ¦â

âI canâtâ¦â

âAnd you love cars,â Nick said softly. âI can see that.â He motioned out of the window to where the smashed grey Mercedes lay between them and the police. âIf you have to steal cars, at least you steal cars with class. Itâs taken a darn sight more skill to steal this baby than a cheaper job.â

His dark eyes twinkled down at Len and it wasnât just Len who was mesmerised. Shanni was speechless. This was a whole new facet to the man. Up until now she hadnât been able to see past the smooth exterior, but nowâ¦there was a human being in there somewhere. âIf youâre willing to learn about mechanics while youâre in remand school, Iâd bet thereâd be luxury car dealers whoâd be prepared to take you on,â he said.

âYeah? Like who?â

âLike my uncle,â Shanni interjected, smiling up at Nick as if he was talking absolute sense. âHe runs a dealership. I know one of his lads has a police record, but my uncle doesnât careâas long as he keeps straight now and knows how to fix his engines.â

âHe wouldnât employ me.â

âYouâd have to do your time first,â Shanni said thoughtfully. âBut if you put your time in the remand home to good useâ¦â

âI ainât going to remand school.â

âHey, Len, just think about it,â Nick urged gently. âWhile we sleep.â

âAnother story, I think,â Nick said as he returned to his mat. Shanniâs eyes were wide with appreciation.

As were Nickâs. This woman was extraordinary. As heâd made Len warm and comfortable and soothed his terror, sheâd given Len what he most neededâhope. Len was dead tired, and, if Nickâs guess was right, he was full of sleeping pills. Now all they had to do was set the moodâand Shanni was right onto that.

âHow about if I read *Goodnight, Goodnight*?â she suggested.

âHarryâs asleep already,â Nick said reluctantly. Heâd lifted Harry into his arms again, unthinking, as if it was an instinctive movement. It was starting to feel as if the child belonged there.

âHe might wake up if I donât keep reading,â Shanni said

softly. âIf I keep my reading going Iâll soothe him into sleeping for ever.â

Or who else might she soothe into sleep?

It was soâ¦seductive.

Shanni had turned on the heater and the room was warmâalmost over-warm. The huge breakfast had made Nick feel so sated he almost needed sleep again himself, even though it was only two hours since heâd woken. The child in his arms slept on and on, catching up on missed time.

Shanniâs voice was low and sweet and melodicâsoothing him toward rest.

If Nick hadnât been watching Lenâ¦

But he was. He was watching Len like a hawk. The gun was slowly slipping. It must be *so* heavy.

Please let those outside not use the loud hailer or try to contact him again, Nick thought, but if Shanniâs brother had twigged as to why she wanted the hay fever tablets then they wouldnât be so stupid.

They werenât.

Shanni read and Nick watched Lenâand Nick watched Shanni. He watched the gentle rise and fall of her breast, and he listened to the soft lilting of her voice. If I was three years old this is where Iâd like to go to kindergarten, he thought dazedly, and had to shake himself. No one had ever read him stories. Not ever!

For heavenâs sake, he was thirty-two years old. This was stupid. He was feeling like this just because it was a novelty. A situation like thisâ¦

A woman like Shanniâ¦

Heâd never met anyone like her.

And finally her voice fell away to nothing.

And sheâd succeeded.

âHeâs asleep,â she said softly. At the window, Lenâs face had fallen forward so his chin was resting on his chest. His gun had fallen to one side in the chair and his hands were lifeless. His chest rose and fell in a slow, steady rhythm.

âLen?â Shanni asked softly.

âLeave him be for a bit,â Nick said. âWeâve worked on this.

Letâs not spoil it by hurrying.â

âWeâve worked on this?â

He grinned at that, tension easing. âOkay, smartyboots. Youâve worked on it. How many tablets did you give him?â

âFour at twenty-five milligrams.â

âEnough to stop the worst sneezing.â

âEven mine,â she said virtuously. She wrinkled her nose and her eyes danced. âSee? Not even a sniffle.â

âMiraculous. How many did you take?â

âHmm. Somewhere between zero and none. I canât quite remember.â

He smiled and they waited on, both knowing that once Len was deeply asleep they had nothing to fear. Ten minutes. Fifteen. It was strangely intimate: sitting in a pile of bedding holding the child in his arms with Shanni watching over them.

âHe has such huge problems,â she said out of the blue.

âWho?â Were they talking about Len?

They werenât. âHarry, of course.â She sighed, placing a hand on Harryâs mop of fair curls. âIâm so worried about him. Theyâre threatening to put him into a home for psychologically disturbed children.â

âIs he?â

âPsychologically disturbed?â She shrugged. âMaybe. Wouldnât you be if your dad was dead and your mother and stepfather hated you?â And then she frowned at the look on Nickâs face. âWhy? What have I said?â

âNothing.â He somehow put aside shadows of past hurt and shook his head. âThis has nothing to do with me. Or you, either, as far as I can see. Heâs just one of your students, isnât he? What do you get from taking the worries of the world onto your shoulders?â

âMeaning you think Iâm stupid for trying?â

âMaybe.â He shrugged.

She gave him a long, measuring look. âNo. You donât mean that. For a lawyer, I thought you were pretty good to Len just then.â

âIâm a magistrate. I have to learn niceties.â

âLegal niceties. Not human niceties. Butâ¦you were nice just now. It wasnât all an act.â

How did she know that? She didnât!

âSo how about you, then?â he demanded, changing tack. Talking about him made him feel like running a mile. âSurely your familyâyour uncle with the car dealershipâwouldnât seriously think about employing such a kid?â

âThereâs no hope for him if someone doesnât,â she said sadly. âSo maybe itâs just as well there are people like my family in the world. People who care.â

âPeople whoâll get walked all over.â

âSays you.â She shrugged. âThe nice magistrate who tries so hard not to be. Nice, I mean.â And then she smiled, letting him off the hook where he was beginning to squirm. âAnyway, maybeâ¦â She cast a long look across at Lenâand another at Harry. âWhile we have both our children sound asleep, I think itâs time we got ourselves out of here, donât you?â

âI couldnât agree more. Iâll get the gun.â

It was time to leave. But there was a part of himâa part which he didnât understand in the leastâthat didnât want to leave at all.

There was no choice. Moveâ¦

But when he went to hand over Harry, the childâs arms tightened like a vice, and if Nick had tried to disengage him he would have woken and sobbed.

So when the kindergarten door opened and Shanni, Nick and Harry emerged, to the huge relief of the waiting constabulary, it was the new town magistrate who was holding the baby, and it was the kindergarten teacher who was holding the gun.

CHAPTER THREE

AND after that it was overâsort of. Police officers surged into the building and emerged with one dazed sixteen-year-old who looked half asleep and as if he didnât know what was happening.

âPlease look after him,â Shanni said softly as he emerged, handcuffed and secured. âHeâs just a scared kid.â

But the police were taking no chances. He was taken away, sirens screaming, while Nick and Shanni blinked in the unaccustomed daylight and Harry stirred in Nickâs arms and started to sob.

A womanâin her late twenties, dishevelled and fearfulâemerged from the crowd and tried to take him from Nickâs arms. âHarry. Oh, baby, weâve been so worried. Come to Wendy.â

This, then, must be the woman in charge of Harryâs home within the orphanage, but Harry was unimpressed. He clung desperately to Nick, and as she tried to take him he screamed.

But Nick had had enough. There was nothing more he could do. He unfastened the desperate fingers and placed the weeping bundle of baby into the womanâs outstretched arms.

âHeâs all yours.â

âNo! I want to stay. I want to stay with my Nick.â Harry was screaming with desperation, and Shanni reached forward to hug him.

âHarry, donât worry. Nickâs staying here for two years. Maybe we can visitâ¦â

He had no intention of travelling down that road. No way!

âWe can visit you, Nick?â Shanni asked, and something snapped.

âI donât think so.â

âWhy ever not?â She sounded astounded.

This was blackmail, he thought desperately. He had to get out of hereâfast! And it was kinder to be blunt.

âSee that mountain up there?â Heâd had more than he needed of this emotional heart-pull. What a way to start a new life! âHarry, look at the mountain,â he told him. He raised his voice. âNow!â

He could still get through to him. Harry stopped sobbing for long enough to stare up to where Mount Borrowah towered over the town.

âThatâs where I live,â Nick said flatlyâdefinitely. âIâm sorry, mate, but visiting meâs impossible.â He softened then, just a little. âBut it was great to meet you. You be good for Wendy, now.â

And he turned away before he could see the childâs face crumple into despair.

Then followed the police debriefing. Hours of it, with question after question. What had happened? What threats had been made? Nick and Shanni were interviewed together and separately, and by the time they were finished Nick conceded that the local police force knew their stuff. Theyâd get a solid conviction.

It was a major crime, he thought ruefully. Damn. Thereâd now been one major crime in Bay Beach but he couldnât be involved as magistrate because he was a witness. The committal proceedings would be heard somewhere else.

Which left him still with fishing licences and farm disputes to look forward to. Terrific!

Finally, with interviews complete and after knocking back offers of counselling and psychological help, he emerged to find the police inspector waiting to greet him in his new capacity as magistrate.

âMr Daniels.â His hand was gripped in a massive paw. âWelcome to Bay Beach. Iâm sorry your arrival turned into such a mess. This place isnât always so exciting.â

Great. He made himself say something polite and noncommittal while behind him, Shanni emerged from her own interview room. There were a dozen or so people waiting. Theyâd been silent as Nick had talked to the inspector but now they surged forward, engulfing Shanni in a sea of hugs and laughter and relief. When they finally released her, Nick was introduced to what must have been almost the entire population of the town.

Shanni looked exhausted. Since Nickâs mention of the mountain to Harry, sheâd been decidedly cool, but she was still in control enough to stay polite.

âNick, these are my parents. This is my brother, Robâheâs a senior constable here. Maryâs my sister and sheâs your clerk of courts. Hereâs Sam, Hatty, Will and Louiseâtheyâre all my younger brothers and sisters. Grandma, Grandpa, Aunt Merleâ¦Uncle Simonâheâs the one with the car yard. Uncle Simon, I want you to write a letter for me. Everybody, this is Nick Daniels, the townâs new magistrate. He lives up on Borrowah Mountain. I donât think!â

They didnât understand that, but Nick was surged on, regardless, and his hand was wrung until it felt as if it would drop off.

âWeâre so grateful you were here to take care of our Shanni,â Shanniâs grandmother quavered and, to Nickâs astonishment, Shanniâs brothers and sisters hooted with laughter. He must have looked stunned, because Guy McDonald, Shanniâs father, noticed.

âDonât look like that, Nick.â The elderly farmer clapped Nick on the shoulder. âIâm sure you did well, boy, but we know Shanni isnât a shrinking violet. All last night, when the rest of the town were worrying themselves sick about their kindergarten teacher, Shanniâs mother and I were wondering whether the kid would get out of there alive.â

âI was never going to shoot him,â Shanni said, affronted.

âNo, dear, but you could have talked him into shooting himself,â her mother said comfortably. âAnd when Rob rang and asked what Louise took for night-time hay feverâ¦â

âYou meanâ¦you donât get hay fever?â Nick demanded, staggered.

âLouise does,â Shanni said blithely. âDidnât I sneeze well? When Louise has hay fever she blows us away, and the medicine she takes at night knocks her out so hard she snores the roof off.â

âI do not!â Louise glared.

âDo, too.â There was general laughter, and then the police station door burst open. A large young man came striding in, looking deeply anxious. He seemed every inch a farmerâopen, weathered face with eyes creased by the sun, moleskins, flannelette shirt, wide-brimmed hatâ¦ It only needed a straw

sticking out of the side of his mouth to complete the picture.

The man was in no mood for interruptionsâor introductions. He was looking for his woman.

âShanni!â He walked straight to Shanni, gathered her into his arms and he held her as if there was no tomorrow. And she submitted to his embrace as if she belonged there.

Which made Nick feelâ¦weird? But there was nothing he could do but watch and listen.

âShanni, love,â the stranger was saying, âI took cattle over to the sales at Warrbook and Iâve only just got back to hear this. Hell! Love, are you okay? Iâll kill theâ¦â

âHush.â She was being raised right off her feet as she was hugged. As she smiled down into the strangerâs eyes, Nick was aware of a sharp stab of something that might have been jealousy.

No. Ridiculous thought. There was nothing to be jealous of here, for heavenâs sake.

âIâm fine,â Shanni was saying, struggling to find her feet. She motioned to Nick. âNick, this is John Blainey. John, Nickâs our new magistrate. He was taken hostage, too.â

âAnd you looked after my girl.â Nickâs hand was seized and wrung again until his wrist felt broken. âYou got her out of there. I owe youâ¦â

âI think youâll find Shanni got herself out of there,â Nick said wryly. âI just babysat.â

The man staredâand then he grinned. âYou can still joke. Thatâs fantastic.â He turned and held Shanni tight again. âThat does it, sweetheart. Weâll get married. I know I donât have the house built yet, but if you think Iâm going to let you run yourself into danger againâ¦â

âBy teaching kindergarten?â

âBy doing anything without me,â John said stolidly. âI know how to protect my own, and Iâll protect you.â

He needed to get out of here, Nick decided. As, obviously, did the rest of Shanniâs family. They were all watching the happy couple with expressions ranging from resigned to nauseous.

âIâm off to collect my car,â Nick said, and Rob stepped forward with an expression that said heâd be glad to helpâin fact heâd be glad to get out of there as fast as Nick wanted.

âIâll give you a lift.â

But Shanni was breaking away, turning within Johnâs hold.

âNick, thank you.â

âFor running you into danger? For scaring Len into the kindergarten?â

âOh, Iâve forgiven you for that,â she said blithely, and grinned at his pained expression. âI know it wasnât your fault. I said it because I like to see lawyers wriggle, so Iâm not even going to sue. But thank you anyway.â

âItâs me who should be thanking you.â

âYep,â she said happily and grinned. âAnd Louise. It was her tablets did the trick. But for Harryâ¦â

âI didnât do anything.â

âYou did,â she said urgently. âHe hugged you. And you still can do something. You still can help. I know you said that stupid thing about the mountain but you were stressed. If we can keep that connection upâ¦â

âIâm not prepared to do that,â he said flatly, and she stared.

âWhy ever not?â

âI told you. I donât like kids.â

âYou donât like Harry?â

âShanni, I have a new job here thatâs going to take all my time,â he said desperately, and she smiled.

âRight. Magistrate at Bay Beach. Full-time job.â

âDonât badger the man, Shanni,â her mother said mildly. âHeâs only just walked into the town. Give him at least a few days before you start involving him in any of your save the world missions.â

Shanni wrinkled her pert nose and her eyes twinkled. âA few days?â

âAt least,â her mother said.

Silence.

Thenâ¦ âOkay, Nick Daniels,â she said at last. âYou have a few daysâ grace and then weâll see what we can do to puncture that cool, calm exterior. Oh, and Nickâ¦?â

âYes?â

âGrandma hereâs a great seamstress.â

âPardon?â He was totally at sea.

âYouâll want to get those ties widened.â Her smile was gently teasing. âMagistrates in this town command a bit of respect; they wear ties, and thatâs not a tie. Thatâs a shoelace. Grandma, do

you call that a tie?â

Her grandmother obediently inspected the slip of expensive Italian silk which was now tugged loose around Nickâs open collar. âHmm,â she said, disapproving, and Shanni nodded.

â*Hmm* is right, Grandma. Itâll have to be widened. Nickâs yet to learn that the only impression designer labels give around here is that he doesnât belong.â

Â

Shanni followed her motherâs orders. Nick didnât see her for five days.

In those days life settled into the pattern heâd expectedâand more so. He was given an apartment above the courthouse, which suited him fineâno garden to look after and the windows looked out over the sea almost all the way to Tasmania. He even had a balcony he could use to appreciate the viewâwhich he didnât. He kept the door closed.

The courthouse was old and majestic and sleepy, as was everything about this town. Mary, Shanniâs eldest sister, was his clerk of courts. Comfortably married to the local newsagent, with two little boys at school, she knew everything and everybody in Bay Beach, and Nick found himself thinking it would be easier for everyone concerned if Mary took over the running of the whole courthouse. She practically did anyway.

âThis is Red Barring. Redâs up for abalone fishing without a licence,â she told him on his second case. âHeâll plead that he only caught them for a family celebration, but he used that excuse the last time and the time before. Everyone knows he sells them on the black market.â

âYouâre not supposed to tell me this,â Nick said faintly, and Mary grinned.

âSo you didnât hear me saying it. But itâd be a pity if you were taken in by Redâs baby-blue eyes. Heâs a thief and a bully, and heâs poaching abalone that fishermen have paid big money for the licences to fish. And when Sam Netherfieldâs boat ran aground last month and he realised his insurance had lapsed, Red didnât put in a cent to the appeal. Not one cent! Even though Sam was a character witness for Red at his last trial.â

It was all totally improperâbut when Red stood before the bench and faltered in a whiny voice that heâd just caught the

few abalone for his wifeâs birthday and a tough fine would send him to the wall, it was sort of hardâif not impossibleâfor Nick to refrain from giving the police authority to look at the manâs finances and report back to the court in a week.

And, at the ludicrous look of dismay on the manâs face, he knew it would be stupid to ignore Mary entirely.

But her interference went beyond work.

âWhat are you interested in?â she demanded on his third day at work.

âInterested in?â

âMmm.â She beamed. âWhat are your hobbies? You must have some. All work and no play doesnât make for a nice, well-balanced magistrate.â

âDid you know youâre as bossy and interfering as your sister? â

âI try,â she said smugly. âActually Iâm older than Shanni so I think Iâm better at it. Iâve had more practice. Now, Iâm in the local repertory and we need new members. Can you sing?â

âNo!â

It didnât faze her. âNo matter. Thereâs spots as extras. Or we need painters backstage.â

âNo!â

âOkay.â She took the rebuff unabashed. âThereâs a sailing school on Saturdays, thereâs chess clubs, thereâs canoeing, thereâs angling, thereâsâ¦â

âMary, I am not interested in joining clubs.â

âWhy ever not?â She was astonished.

âI have plenty to do to keep me employed.â

âLike what?â She fixed him with a look that was remarkably like her sisterâs. It was totally disconcerting. âYour work here is hardly *Go, Go, Go*. What else do you intend to do in this town?â

What else indeed? Nick took the case file heâd come out to retrieve, retreated to his office and glowered.

What?

In the city his work had been eighty hours a week plus. That was the way he liked it. He thrived on work. And his spare time? He filled it with restaurants, plays, films and art shows, all with different womenâ¦

There was a dearth of restaurants, plays, films and art shows

around here, he thought desperately. *And* beautiful women.

âNickâ¦â There was yet another knock on the door and he sighed.

âIâm busy,â he called.

âNonsense.â The door opened and Mary walked right in. Followed by Shanniâ¦and followed by Harry, and his heart kicked at the sight of the pair of them.

Shanni was just as he remembered though not as dishevelled as after a night of being held hostage. She was now wearing a soft pink print dress which was bare around her shoulders and suited her perfectly. Her curls were tied back with a pale pink and blue ribbon. She looked happy, young and carefree, and her smile enfolded everyone in the room. It was Maryâs smile and then some. A knockout smile!

âHi,â she said. âMary said you werenât busy.â

âMary saidâ¦â Something would have to be done about Mary. Soon!

âShe also said your lunch-hour is between one and two, but today you have no more court cases until three. So Harry and I came to take you out to lunch.â

By her side, Harry said absolutely nothing. He was dressed in simple shorts and T-shirt as heâd been wearing the last time Nick saw him, and the cast on his leg looked absurdly heavy for such a little one. And he was silent. Waiting.

For what? Nick knew. Harry held onto Shanniâs hand and he looked at Nick with eyes that said he was waiting to be struck. Orâ¦he was waiting for Nick to say no.

Same thing.

âI donât think I canâ¦â Nick tried to prevaricate but it sounded weak, even to him. For heavenâs sake, he did *not* want to get involved here. But he didnât want to hurt the childâ¦

âWe arenât looking for anything formal, are we, Harry?â Shanni told him, choosing to ignore his hesitation. âBut Thursday is my half-day off, Harry wanted to see you and Mary tells us that youâre free.â

âIâm busy.â

âDonât be silly. Thereâs nothing I canât handle here,â Mary said blithely, beaming at her sister in friendly conspiracy. âOff you go and enjoy yourself. Itâll do you good to get out into the fresh air.â

âI donât need fresh air.â

âOh, for heavenâs sake.â Mary assumed her severest look, facing him with an expression that said, No nonsense or youâll stay in after school and do two hundred lines. She used Shanniâs school-marm tone. âYou sound like this town will bite, Nick Daniels. Thereâs nothing out there to be afraid of, and Shanni will take good care of you.â

Then Mary and Shanni both beamed.

What was a man to do? âIâm being railroaded,â he said weakly.

âOf course,â Mary agreed. âItâs what the McDonald girls are good at. Weâve been trained from birth by a very railroading mama. And grandma. And great-grandma come to that. Shanni, make him take his tie off.â

âTake your tie off,â Shanni said. âYou canât eat fish and chips on the beach when youâre wearing a designer shoelace.â

âIâm notâ¦â He rose and backed off.

âYes, you are,â Mary said, and she put her hands behind him and shoved him toward the door. âKnow when youâre beaten, Your Worship. Out you go and donât come back before three. Thatâs an order.â

He stood on the pavement and couldnât think of a single thing to say. Shanni was grinning like a Cheshire cat and, beside her, Harry was simply looking. And looking and looking, as if he couldnât get enough of him.

âShanniâ¦â He was starting to sound inane. He was starting to *feel* inane!

âIâve ordered fish and chips,â she said, ignoring him. âWeâre collecting them down at the wharf in five minutes.â

âWhat if I donât want to come?â He sounded pathetic!

âOf course you want to come,â she said kindly. âYou just donât think you do. Harry and I are here to change your mind. Shall we take your carâor walk?â

âI donâtâ¦â

âDonât want to drive? Okay.â She beamed. âItâs not far. Harry doesnât like cars and heâs been practising with the new heel on his cast like anything. And please, take your tie off.â

âNo.â

âYou look silly with it on.â She twinkled up at him in the sunlight. âBut itâs the same one you were wearing when we first

saw you. Donât you have a change of clothes?â

âI just brought the one suit. Iâm heading back to Melbourne at the weekend.â Heâd go nuts if he couldnât.

âNow thatâs a waste of a weekend if ever I heard one,â she said. âSpending it in the city changing designer ties!â

And she smiled straight at himâand, despite himself, he was forced to smile right back. Unbelievable! And then he found himself walking at her side down toward the harbour. Harry clumped on bravely on her other side, clutching her hand and occasionally venturing a peep at him around the soft folds of her dress.

âDo you never go to Melbourne?â Nick asked, trying to think of something to say to stop him sounding even more pathetic. As a lawyer and magistrate he was used to facing the world on his terms. It wasnât often the world had him as off balance as this.

âI did my training there,â she told him. âBut I hated it. I came back here every weekend to get my fix of sea air and laid-back country lifestyle.â

âSo you admit you need your fix of sea air. Well, I need my fix of city. Weâre equally addicted, Miss McDonald.â

âWe are indeed,â she agreed equably. âEqually nuts, but if weâre comparing the sea to the city I know which Iâd rather. What do you think, Harry?â She tugged the little boy forward, scooped him up and placed him so he was between the two of them. âDo you think weâre nuts?â

Harry considered. âNo,â he said at last, seriously, and Shanni chuckled her delight. She really did have the loveliest chuckle.

âYouâre wonderful, Harry,â she told him. Then she looked down at him. He was walking bravely but the cast must be a pain. âDo you want Nick to carry you?â

âNo.â

That was definite enough, Shanni considered. âOkay. What about playing One, Two, Three, Jump?â

Harry didnât know what she meant. His small face stared up at his kindergarten teacher in mute enquiry.

âWe need to teach him,â she told Nick, but Nick shook his head, as in the dark as Harry.

âSorry.â

âSorry, what?â She stared at him.

âI donât know what youâre talking about.â

That stopped her dead. She whirled to face them, staring from Nick down to Harry and back to Nick again. âYou meanâ¦you *both* donât know One, Two, Three, Jump?â

âEnlighten our ignorance,â Nick said dryly, knowing she was about to do just that.

But she gave him a strange lookâreassessing. It was an odd sideways look, and it left Nick feeling disturbed. As if she was probing where he didnât want to be probed.

âItâs very simple,â she said at last, falling in again beside them, but still with that disturbed look on her face. Theyâd left the single line of shops in the main street behind and were walking down the hill to where the boats were tied up in the harbour below. âOne, Two, Three, Jump requires two adults and one child. We have all the prerequisites right here. Nick, take Harryâs hand.â

âButâ¦â

âYou quibble, we canât play,â she said direfully. âNo quibbling. Take Harryâs hand.â

There was nothing for it. Nick put his hand down and took Harryâs fingers in his. Harry looked high up into his face, and then stared intently at their linkingâhis tiny hand in Nickâs large one. Then, very slowly, Harry smiled. He turned and headed on down the hill between his two anchors, stumping gamely on his cast, heading into the wind. As if heâd just had a win of gargantuan proportions.

âNow weâre ready,â Shanni announced, and if Nick thought he saw a glimmer of a tear on her eyelashes then surely he was imagining it. She swung Harryâs arm. âOneâ¦twoâ¦threeâ¦!â And before he realised what he was doing, Nick was swinging Harryâs little body out before him.

âJump!â

The tiny boy flew high, held safely between them and, when Harry landed, the look on his face of absolute incredulity that anything like this could be happening to him made Nick falter.

Damn, he might be sure there were tears on Shanniâs eyelashes, but what the heck was the lump doing in *his* throat?

There was nothing for it now but to do it all over again. They One, Two, Three, Jumped all the way to the fish shop, and then

Nick held the fish-and-chip parcel in one hand and Shanni carried the drinks in another so they could keep on One, Two, Three, Jumping all the way to the beach.

And finally Nick found himself sitting on the sand by the sea, fish and chips spread out before him, and he had absolutely no idea in the world how heâd come to be there.

CHAPTER FOUR

To his surprise, they ate in silence.

Nick was no longer sure what he expected of this girl, but silence surely wasnât it. Sheâd chatted and laughed all the way to the beach, but now, sitting on the sand with Harry on her knee and a spread of fish and chips beside her, she had subsided into a silence that Nick found almost disconcerting.

Not that he didnât welcome it. He needed time to get his breath back.

So he ate the fillets of fish that must surely have only been caught that morning, and he crunched on the golden chips and he absorbed the silence. It was peaceful. It was right, but it wasâ¦strange.

As were the sensations. The sand was sun-warmed and soft, and the wind was blowing gently in across the rolling waves. The beach was pristine. There were no footsteps for milesâno one had been on this beach since high tide. The town was clustered round a horseshoe bayâthe Bay Beach the town was named afterâbut Shanni had led them down the track to the back beach, which was the beach the tourists didnât use. Miles wide, with golden sand stretching away into the distance, there were ancient Norfolk pines at its higher reaches casting sentinels of shade across the sand-hills. There was nothing else.

They might as well be the first man and first woman and first child ever to sit on this beach, and, with the silence, it was weird.

When had he last sat on a deserted beach like this?

Never, he thought, and the knowledge was suddenly bleak. He was a child of the city, whoâd never had parents to take him anywhere.

He was like Harry.

No!

He wasnât going to think like that, he decided harshly, because that was the way of attachment. That was what this girl

wanted, he knew. This outing was planned with one thing in mindâto establish a link between Nick and the little boy she was holding.

âFinished your chips?â She was smiling at him, still with that strange look in her eyes that said she was searching for something deeper than an answer about the chips. What was she seeing? He didnât want to know.

âYes. Thank you.â Theyâd bought far too many.

Shall I feed them to the seagulls?â Harry asked, and Shanni nodded her agreement.

âThatâs a fine idea. Go right ahead.â

Okay, but he wasnât feeding them where he sat. This was a serious business. Carefully Harry wrapped up his pile of cooling chips, pushed himself awkwardly to his feet and stumped down to the waterâs edge. Then he laid the parcel on the wet sand, just as carefully unwrapped it and started tossing chips one at a time skyward but back toward the adults.

The gulls screamed in from everywhere, forming a cacophony of sound and movement between adults and child. A barrierâ¦ It was as if that was what Harry had meant to happen.

And for a long moment Nick watched, his heart doing all sorts of strange wrenching. Remembering just how hard his lessons of solitude had been to learnâ¦

âTheyâre planning on doing psychological assessment on him,â Shanni said conversationally, and Nick somehow hauled himself back to the present.

Psychological assessmentâ¦ âBecause of the hostage thing?â

âNo.â She shook her head. âBecause of before. And how he is now.â

âI donât understand.â

âThis is as good as it gets,â she said sadly. âHeâs as happy as he can be right now. Iâm trying so hard, and so is Wendy, the head of his childrenâs home. But heâs so withdrawn. Around most people he dives for cover, or, if they come close, he screams blue murder. Screams and screams and screams. Wendy says he has night terrors and heâs keeping every child in the home awake half the night.â

âSo?â

âSo if we donât get through to him then heâll be placed in a

psychiatric institution. Wendy canât copeâand who can blame her? Sheâs running a group home for children at risk and she has more than Harry to care for. Theyâve tried foster homes but he doesnât last more than a night. Adoptionâs out of the question like he is now. We *must* get through to him.â

Weâ¦

âYou meanâ¦â Nick stirred a whirl of sand under his fingers. âYou mean *you.* And Wendy.â

She flicked a glance at him. âOf course.â She shrugged. âI mean me and Wendy.â

âIf you donât mind me saying this,â he said softly, âI donât see any professional detachment in this.â

âProfessional detachment?â

âSurely your role of kindergarten teacher doesnât include mental health therapy for your students.â

Silence.

âHeâs not your responsibility,â Nick went on. There was no easy way to say this but it must be said. âIf Harry needs professional help, then surely a psychiatric institution is the place where heâll get it.â

âHe needs to be loved.â

âThen he needs to be cured and then adopted.â

âOh, sure,â she said, jeering. âCured and then adopted. But itâs a Catch 22 situation, isnât it, Mr Daniels? He canât be adopted until heâs cured and he canât be cured until heâs adopted.â

âThat sounds clever.â

âItâs not.â She got up, her colour heightened so her cheeks were turning to rose, and there was anger building. Her eyes flashed fire andâ¦contempt? âOf course itâs not simple, either,â she flashed at him. âBut Iâve no intention of talking smart or simple theories. Iâm talking about a little boyâs life. If I could, then Iâd take him home with me. Maybe Iâd have a chance to make a difference, but he doesnât want a woman. He needs a man to attach to. Everyone says that.â

âThis is ridiculous. Itâs not your job to worry about it.â

âOf course itâs not my job. Itâs no oneâs job, but at least I try. At least I care. Not like some people who say they live on stupid mountains!â

âI might as well do,â he snapped, stung. He rose to face her, fire meeting fire. Her anger was palpableâand so was his. How dared she throw this at him!

âMeaning?â

âMeaning, no, of course I donât want to get involved,â he threw back at her. âBecause what good would it do? You think I should try to form an attachment and then move away? You know as well as I do that itâd make everything worse.â

âNick, you could do a lot of good in two years,â she said, softening as if there really was a chance she could persuade him.

âYouâre kidding.â

âNo, you could,â she said urgently. âMary says youâre bored with work already. The orphanage system runs a big-brother scheme. Just picking a child up from individual homes, taking him out, doing this sort of thing. Mucking around in the sun. Being a friend.â

âI wouldnât know the first thing about being a friend to a three-year-old.â

âIâll teach you,â she said. âWendy and I both think heâs desperate for male contact. He and his dad were so close, and any female contact he had was appalling. He needs to bond with a male.â

âYou *have* to be kidding!â He was facing her square on, and he couldnât believe this was happening. She was almost pleadingâbut not quite. Her eyes defied him to do this thing. They told him that this was his duty as another humanâor the sort of human with any decency at all.

The sort with any loveâ¦

But any love had been kicked out of Nick Daniels a long time ago. He stared down into her blazing eyes and the feeling that grew in his heart was leaden and grey. What she was asking was impossible.

âNo,â he said flatly, and took a step back. âYou donât know what youâre asking.â

She opened her mouth to retortâand then shut it again. Once again there was that lookâthe look that said she saw further than words. And something changed. In that instant, anger moved to concern.

âWhatâs happened to you, Nick?â she said softly, almost whispering into the soft wind. âWhatâs put you on top of that

mountain?â

âI donâtâ¦â

âYou donât want to talk about it. I can see that.â She smiled suddenly, tension dissolving as if it had never been. She even managed a wavering smile. âHmm. The plot thickens.â

âThe plotâ¦â

âWhy you wonât take your stupid tie off and you keep combing your hair so you look like a city lawyerâeven when itâs totally inappropriate. What harmâs a bit of ruffled hair? You might look like a sleek city lawyer in the city, but here your image just makes you look like Mafioso. And you donât know One, Two, Three, Jumpâ¦â

âShanniâ¦â

âYes?â Amazingly there was a twinkle dancing back into her eyes.

âButt out.â

âNope.â She grinned. âItâs not my style. Iâll back off, though,â she said equably. âI can see a bit clearer what Iâm fighting now. So Iâll back off. But butt out? Never!â

There was still time left before three. Nickâs idea of backing off was to retire quietly to his chambers. Shanniâs idea of backing off was to head to the playground.

It was two against one and the outcome was never in doubt.

âI would like to go on the roundabout,â Harry said wistfully, looking at a platform mounted on springs, with four seats made to look like bucking horses. The idea was to sit on a horse and sway as you spun. The sight made Nickâs stomach churn, especially after all those chipsâ¦

âThatâs another fine idea,â Shanni said roundly, fixing Nick with a look that defied him to refuse the child. âHop right up.â

But suddenly Harry wasnât so sure.

âItâs high.â

âNick will help you onâwonât you, Nick?â

Oh, of course! He was getting almost past argument. So he hopped up onto the platform and lifted Harry onto a horseâand then, before he knew what she was about, the platform started to spin. Shanni, devilment in her eyes, had started to push.

âHeyâ¦â He clutched the handle-cum-bridle, his hands over Harryâs small ones, and held on for dear life. âStop!â

âItâs okay, Nick! I can spin you both.â She was using both hands, running, shoving the platform around into free whirl. Her hair was flying, there was mischief sparking in her eyes and she was laughing up at both of them. âHold on, Harry!â

Hold on, Harry? What about *him*? âShanni, let me off.â

âYou wonât fall if you hold on,â Harry said kindly. And then, as the platform sped up, he threw back his head and smiled shyly up at Nick. âThis is fun!â

Fun!

But Harryâs smile was infectiousâand so was the way Shanni was laughing at them as she spun them around and around and around. He was way out of control and this woman had him so mesmerised there wasnât a thing he could do about it. âIâve been set up,â he managed weakly. âYou machiavellianâ¦â

âDrat, youâve found my true nature.â She chortled and ran on. âThereâs nothing for it but to spin you faster. And faster and faster and fasterâ¦â

She did just that. Nick held on, standing above Harry and, whether he realised it or not, he was playing the protector. Because Harry was holding on as if his life depended on it, he was spinning and spinning, but *his* Nick was right above him and he knew his Nick wouldnât let him fall.

And suddenly it wasâ¦magic? The sun shone warmly down on their heads. The waves washed in and out on the beach below them. They spun and they spun, and Shanni pushed and ran and pushed and smiledâ¦and watched both these males.

And she wonderedâ¦

âShanni!â

It couldnât last. Fifteen minutes pushing was surely enough for any childâand Nick was all set to lose his chips!âbut somehow heâd quelled his protests and it wasnât Harry who stopped them. The yell came from the road, and Nick looked over to find Shanniâs John heading straight for them.

Good old dependable John, Nick thought wryly, watching him hurrying across the sand-hills as they spun. The look on his face said he was here to save his Shanni from any danger. But from which of them? From the psychotic three-year-old or the slick city lawyer?

John must have decided it was fate worse than death for Shanni to be stuck with such a combination, Nick thought

humourlessly. Little did John know his beloved had engineered the whole thingâincluding stranding him on this devilish platform. It was Nick who needed saving!

But John only had eyes for Shanni. No matter. John was welcome to save Shanni all he liked, Nick decided, but then he felt bitterness behind the thoughtâand the sensation jolted him.

What on earth did he have to be bitter about? he demanded incredulously of himself. This girl was nothing to do with him, and neither was the man she intended to marry.

âShanniâ¦loveâ¦â

The roundabout slowed as Shanniâs attention was distracted. Thank heavenâ¦ Nick abandoned his horse, staggered off, lurched as his feet hit solid earth and then tried to stop his world from falling right over.

Good griefâ¦ And Harry was looking at him as if he was wondering why Nick had climbed off!

âJohn.â Shanni had smiled a welcome as John strode across the sand-hills, but Nick heard a note of wariness enter her voice. As if she wasnât sure what to expectâ¦

âMary told me youâd be here.â John was out of breath, as though heâd been hurrying for much longer than the time it had taken to stride across the sand-hills. He sounded aggrieved. âI thought you were checking bathroom tiles on your afternoon off.â

âNope.â Shanni shrugged and kept her smile fixed. âYou told me I should check tiles, but I donât see the point when we havenât decided on a house plan.â She smiled placatingly and then tried to extend the conversation. âJohn, you remember Nick?â

âOf course I remember Nick,â John said grumpily, digging his hands deep in his pockets. He flicked an acknowledging nod at the staggering Nick and went straight back to his grievance. Which was just as well, because Nick was in no state to greet him. âSo why werenât you at the tile place? I decided to leave the hay and come in and meet you.â

âPush,â said Harry. âNick, why are you off?â

âToo much of a good thing,â Nick gasped. He waved a helpless hand at Shanni, who was looking suspiciously as if she might laugh at his plight. Sheâd better not! âBut go right ahead

without me. Shanni, push!â

âWuss!â But she pushed, grinning at him without sympathy and then turning back to John as she pushed.

âJohn, it might rain tomorrow,â she said thoughtfully, still pushing. Harry gave Nick a look of disgustâWimpy adults! his look saidâbut then decided heâd turn his attention to the sea, as if he was looking for pirates.

âThe hay will spoil if it rains,â Shanni said.

âThatâs why I donât understand why youâre not where you said you would be,â John snapped. âI donât want to waste time.â

âSoâ¦you were coming to choose tilesâor check on me?â

âI just wanted to see that you were okay.â

âThatâs really nice of you, John,â she said softly. âBut, as you can see, Iâm fine. Choosing tiles or eating lunch on the beach are hardly dangerous occupations. Donât let the hay spoil on my account.â

âWhy are you hereâwith him?â He glared at Nick and Nick raised his eyebrows and smiled politely. Or tried to smile politely. His whole world was still looking decidedly crooked.

He said nothing. One reason was that he knew when to shut up, but the second was that he was still concentrating on balance. Very important, balance! He wondered how it would look if he lay down.

He didnât. A man had some pride! Plus the sand was wobbling.

âNick and I are taking Harry out to lunch.â Shanni was smiling at Harry, who was still looking for pirates. Great! They were welcome to pay attention to anything other than Nickâs condition! âThis is John, Harry. You want to say hello?â

âNo,â said Harry, and Nick didnât blame him.

But he was still spinning! âDonât you want to stop yet?â Nick demanded.

âNo,â said Harry, very definitely. âIf you pushed as well I could go faster.â

Good grief! But there was no alternative. Clutching his balance and pride together, Nick managed a sickly shrug. He pushed.

And he listened.

âShanni, letâs go,â John was saying urgently. âIf you come with me now we still have enough time to choose tiles.â

âThatâs crazy,â Shanni said, exasperated. âWe donât even have the house plan.â She took a deep breath. âIn fact, we havenât even decided to get married.â

That floored John. âOf course weâre getting married.â

âYou havenât actually asked me.â

âWe talked about it the other day. And we always knewâ¦â

âJohn, we need to talk about this by ourselves,â she said urgently, casting a sideways glance at Nickâwho just as carefully looked away. âMaybe we could meet tonight.â

But John had no intention of being placated. âThis is ridiculous. I came into town to choose tiles.â

âIâm with Harry. And Nick.â

âLeave the kid with the lawyer.â

âHeyâ¦â Nickâs protest was involuntaryâbut unnecessary. He could safely leave this to Shanni. She was angry enough for both of them.

âThe *kidâs* name is Harry,â she said bluntly. âNot âthe kidâ. And Harry is my friend. I invited him and Nickâwhoâs a magistrate, not just a lawyerâout to lunch and for a play in the playground. When weâre finishedâand not beforeâIâll take Harry back to Wendy.â

âWendyâ¦â Johnâs voice rose in incredulity. âYou mean this is a kid from the *orphanage*?â

âYes,â she said, and there was ice dripping from the word. Back off, Nick was thinking urgently, but there was no way he could get that message across. John had no intention of backing off. This was a man used to getting his own way, and he wasnât tuned in to ice.

âShanni, this is ridiculous,â John said through gritted teeth. âThe whole town saw you walking down the street with this guy, and with the kid between you. Malcolm Taylor rang to tell meâ¦â

âSo this is the real reason youâre here?â Shanniâs anger was building by the minute. âBecause Malcolm saw me with another man and decided to report me?â

âThe town will think youâre two-timing me!â

âBy sitting on the beach eating fish and chips with the local magistrate? In broad daylight and with a child between us?â Nick and Harry were forgotten now. If he were John heâd disappear for a while, Nick thought. He could feel the anger radiating from Shanni, and it was almost tangible.

âItâs not his place to take you to lunch.â

â*He* didnât take me to lunch. I took *him* for lunch.â

âItâs true,â Nick said mildly. âI had no choice at all. Ask Harry. I donât have a choice in anything. This lady has the force of two bulldozers.â

He was ignored.

âLook, come and choose tiles and weâll forget all about this,â John said urgently. âI meanâ¦the town will forgetâ¦â

âThat Iâm a two-timing hussy?â

âI never saidâ¦â

âYou didnât need to.â She was fairly spitting. âJohn, I like you very much, and youâve been a real friendâbut I will not be *owned*.â

âYou mean you donât want to marry me?â

She paused. There was a long, long silence. Unnoticed, the roundabout slowed to a halt. Both Nick and Harry were watching, entranced. Pirates and stomachs forgotten.

âI guessâ¦â She closed her eyes and when she opened them the determination that Nick was starting to know was back in force. âI guess thatâs what I do mean, John. Thank you for asking, but no.â

âYouâre kidding!â

âNo. Iâm sorry.â

âI see.â Once again, there was a long, long silenceâand then John turned to Nick, and the look he cast him was pure malevolence. âI just hope to hell heâs worth it,â he spat. âTo throw me over for a bloody lawyer with designer suitsâ¦â

And he turned and stalked off over the sand-hills.

âPush,â said Harry.

That at least was something he could do. Nick pushed while Shanni gazed at the retreating back of her lover and he could see indecision written all over her.

âGo after him,â he said gently. âI can take care of Harry.â

What was he saying?

âThank you.â She turned to face them, an overbright smile pinned to her face. The decision had been made and there wasnât regret there as far as Nick could see. There was just pure anger. âBut I donât need any more males telling me what to do.â

âEspecially not a designer-suited lawyer?â

It broke the ice. She stared at him for a long minute and then, slowly, the anger faded. âOh, heckâ¦â She broke into a weak chuckle. âOh, help. Iâm sorry. No. Wasnât he awful?â

âButâ¦if people are getting that impressionâ¦â Another thought was hitting Nick with force now, and he didnât like it. If the town thought Shanni was throwing her John over for himâ¦ âMaybe we should cool it.â

She stared. And then her jaw dropped in a sardonic look of incredulity. âCool it? Cool *what*?â

âI donât know. Maybe John has a point.â

Anger was flooding right back. âSo people all over town think Iâm falling for you because I asked you to lunch. *And youâre worried about it?* You jerk! Youâre as conceited and pompous as John.â

âPush,â said Harry firmlyâhe was tired of this adult conversation and was back to basicsâand they both pushed while undercurrents zoomed around and between them as if the playground was wired for electricity. And some of it had got loose.

âIâm sorry,â Nick said after a bit. Maybe he had overreacted. It was just this small-town thing. He did not want to get involved. He glanced at his watch and saw with relief there was just fifteen minutes left before three. âI need to get back.â

âOf course you do,â she said cordially. âDonât let me keep you.â

âYouâre not coming?â

âHarry and I are playing on the roundabout,â she snapped. âYou do what you like.â

âRight. Right, then.â

He took a deep breath, looked at her for a long minute and nodded.

âSee you later, Harry,â he said.

âWhen?â Harry demanded, startled. His voice was urgent. âWhen will you see me?â

âIâm not sure.â

âMr Daniels is a very busy man,â Shanni said icily. âHeâs probably got tiles to buy.â

âI do have a court case or two to judge.â

âThen donât let us keep you,â she said through gritted teeth. âHarry and I can manage very well without you. We can manage without men in general and without two males in particular. And one of themâs you.â

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âWhatâs been happening?â

âI was expecting you to come back with a black eye at least.â

Nick was no sooner in the courthouse than he was pounced on. Mary was at her desk, agog, and Rob was standing beside her, immaculate in his police uniform. The physical likeness to Shanni was unmistakableâas was their ability to ignore his personal boundaries.

He stared at both of them with dislike. There was sand in his shoes. He needed time to empty it before he was due in court in four minutes. His stomach was still churning from the roundabout and he felt ill. He didnât need an inquisition.

âWhy are you here?â he snapped at Rob.

âHey, I brought the prisoner,â Rob said, aggrieved. âNot that thereâs any need for force. Itâs Bart Commin in for shoplifting. He pinches four cans of baked beans every second Wednesday, because thatâs the day before pension. It drives everyone nuts, but as soon as we make it officialâtry to give him the beans and dock his pensionâhe changes stores. We figure he likes the excitement.â

âGreat.â Nick groaned. âFourteen yearsâ intellectual training for this.â

âYour tieâs crooked,â Mary said, bright-eyed and interested. âYouâve never had a crooked tie before.â

âSo your sister had her wicked way with me behind the sand-hills,â Nick snarled. âYou want to put a two-page announcement in the local paper?â

âDonât reckon we have to,â Rob said lazily, and grinned. âJohnâs done it for us.â

Nick stared. âWhat exactly do you mean by that?â

âHeâs spreading it all over town,â Rob told him. âIâve heard it from at least three people on the way here. Seems my sisterâs thrown John over for the magistrate.â

âOh, great!â

âYour hairâs not mussed,â Mary said, in a tone saying she

wouldnât have minded if it was. âThat means you canât have been too far out of line.â

âPlus they had the littlâun with them,â Rob agreed. âIt wouldnât have happened.â

âYouâll go far as a policeman,â Nick snapped. âGreat detective work. Do you mind? I have a court case to run.â

âBart wonât worry if youâre running late,â Rob said easily. âIâm prosecuting and heâs defending himself. Thereâs hardly an army of lawyers waiting.â

âNo.â He would have preferred it if there wasâin fact he would have preferred anything to these four enquiring eyes.

âDid she really throw John over?â Mary asked, breathless.

He guessed he could tell them that. âShe did.â

There was a long drawn-out sigh from the pair of them, and he looked on, bemused.

âDo you mind telling me whatâs going on?â

âWe canât stand the man,â Rob said simply. âNone of us can. We were starting to worry sheâd marry him through lack of competition.â

âAnd now along you come,â Mary said dreamily.

âRob?â Nick eyed his arresting officer with disfavour.

âYes, sir?â There was a glint in Robâs eye that reminded Nick of Shanni, and he wasnât sure he liked it. He wasnât the least bit sure he wasnât being laughed at here.

âThereâs a jug of water on my bench. Fetch it and throw it over your sister.â

âIf you say so.â Rob grinned and Mary stopped looking dreamy and gave a half-hearted chuckle herself.

âOkay. I know Iâm being stupid. Itâs justâ¦ I mean youâre eligible as anything, and youâd be quite good-looking if you didnât have theâ¦â She paused and Nick glowered.

âIf I didnât have the what?â

âPot-belly and bald spot?â Rob suggested, and hooted with laughter. âJeepers, Mary, leave the guy alone.â But Mary just looked helpful.

âItâs your hairstyle and slick clothes,â she said. âThey make you look like a gangster.â

âGee, thanks.â

âOr one of those smart city lawyers you see on the movies,â

she added. âAnd youâre not one of those.â

âNo. Moreâs the pity.â

âYou donât mind me saying it?â

âWhy should I?â He rolled his eyes. âGo ahead. Any more improvements you can think of while youâre at it?â

âYou donât really have to wear those skinny ties,â she ventured.

âThe suit doesnât fit here,â Rob added, joining right into the spirit of things. âOld Judge Andrews wore tweed.â

âThe old judge kept forgetting to take his wellingtons off, too,â Mary said thoughtfully. âHe had a hobby farm so he kept arriving in court smelling of cow dung. It made himâ¦I donât knowâ¦more approachable somehow.â

âYouâd like me to come to court without my hair combed, in a tweed jacket, a wide tie and stinking of cow dung?â

âYou have to do something. Youâll never win our Shanni like you are now.â Rob chortled at Nickâs expression and threw up his hands in mock surrender. âOkay, Your Worship. I can see Iâve gone too far. Let me organise a prisoner for you and weâll get this court case under way.â

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He shouldnât worry.

He shouldnât give a damn what they all thought of him, Nick decided as the afternoon wore on. The cases were trivial and demanded hardly any thought at all. He might as well think of his appearance.

He might as well think about Shanni.

Which was really, really stupid.

Heâd go up to town this weekend, he decided. If he left by five tomorrow night he could be back in his inner-city apartment by nine. Maybe ring a couple of friends, catch a late show, see the latest Enrico exhibition on Saturdayâ¦

âFour hundred dollars or ten days in custody,â he said, and discovered the whole courtroom was looking at him.

âButâ¦â It was Mary, and she bit her lip almost as soon as she said it.

âWhat?â

âFifty bucks or overnight,â the defendant explained for her, in a voice that sounded like gravel. The old man was an

alcoholic. He stank. The smell of him reached every corner of the court.

âOvernight gives us time to see heâs fed and washed,â Rob explained.

âSo ten days gives you longer. Next caseâ¦â

And he closed his file and glared at them all. And they glared right back. Every single one of them.

Â

And Shanni was waiting for him when court was finished for the day. Her anger was still sky-high. He came out of court, tossed his gown aside and turned to find Shanni watching him from the corridor.

âI suppose you know what youâve done,â she said bluntly.

Nick sighed. Now what?

âLetâs see,â he said wearily. âAccording to town gossip, so far today Iâve ravished you over fish and chips, Iâve had my wicked way in the sand-hills, Iâve broken your engagement to your knight in shining armour, and Iâve smashed the unwritten dress code for Bay Beach court. What else is there left?â

âYouâve made Emma feed Bart for ten days!â

âEmma?â

âRobâs wife. She does the meals for the custody cells. And Bartâll dry out. Weâll have him screaming the place down.â

âThen maybe he needs to be dried out.â This was none of her business.

âI thought Mary warned you. Bartâs dried out at least fifty times in living memory, all of them in the police cells, all of them with Rob and Emma not getting sleep for days and all of them totally useless as he hits the bottle the minute heâs back on the town. But go ahead. Jail him.â

âI already have.â

âI know.â She gritted her teeth. âSmart city lawyersâ¦â

âI *am* the magistrate,â he said mildly, and she ground her teeth some more.

âYeah. Well, stop filling police cells and go do something useful.â

Something usefulâ¦ For heavenâs sake, hadnât these people

heard of a little respect? *He was the magistrate!*

But respect wasnât in Shanniâs vocabulary.

âThe psychologist is coming to the childrenâs home tomorrow to assess Harry,â she continued. âThatâs why Iâm here. Donât get any funny ideas that I might want to see you or anything. I donât. But Wendy needs a statement saying that youâve been able to make contact.â

âMake contact?â Nick stared, bemused. She was still furious and she looked really something when she was angry. As if there were sparks inside as well as out.

âYes. That youâve been able to communicate with him and heâs showed signs of affection. Otherwise he risks being classified as autistic and weâll get nowhere. Heâll be taken away from Wendy, and thereâs no chance heâll be considered for adoption with a label like that.â

âShanni, itâsâ¦â

âNone of your business,â she snapped, eyes flashing. âLike Bart isnât my business. This is a small community here, Nick Daniels, and everyone cares for everybody. And even if it wasnât a small communityâ¦ Havenât you ever heard the line âAny manâs *death* diminishes *me*â¦ââ

That floored him. For heavenâs sakeâ¦ John Donneâs poetry being flung at him by angry kindergarten teachersâ¦

âAny manâs *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankind*â¦â

But Nick wasnât, he thought blankly. No way. Heâd tried as hard as he could, for all of his life, to be exactly the opposite. As uninvolved in mankind as possible.

âHow can you not care?â Shanni said hotly. âNick, youâre the only hope he has.â

âIâ¦â

âYou donât care for anyone. Of course you donât. I can see that.â She shook her blonde curls in fury. âSo donât do anything about it. See him locked in a psychiatric institutionâ¦â

âHeyâ¦â

âIf you care, then go and talk to Wendy.â

âWendy?â

âWendy,â she said kindly, as if he was a sandwich short of a picnic. âThe head of the childrenâs home heâs in. Bay Beach orphanage is split into five homes and Wendyâs in charge of

Harryâs.â She glared again. âSo help her. If you have one ounce of decency in your body then itâs the least you can do.â

âBut youâ¦â

âAnd you neednât worry. You wonât meet me there, so your reputation will remain untarnished. Iâm going to a movie with my mother. Something about a runaway bride.â She glowered. âWhich will suit me down to the ground. Runaway bride? Ha! If all the men around her are as appalling as you and John, I canât say I blame her for her choice.â

CHAPTER FIVE

GREAT!

He seemed to have sand everywhere. Nick took himself back up to his apartment, emptied his shoes, washed his face and poured himself a glass of wine. It didnât work. He still felt gritty and unsettled.

And like a king-sized rat.

He made himself steak and salad, sat down to watch the news on TV and he still felt rat-like. Which was stupidly unfair.

Finally he showered and changed every piece of his sand-impregnated clothing, donning casual trousers and an open-necked shirt. Then he stared at himself in the mirror. See? he demanded of no one in particularâor the absent Shanni. He could be casual if he wanted to be.

The thought was so pathetic and inane he made himself grin.

His hair needed attention. Heâd washed the sand out, and it was drying as its usual mop of unruly black curls. This wasnât a judge-look at all. He grimaced, started to comb it flat and smoothâand then he stopped.

This was stupid, he conceded. Slick hairstyles for casual was stupid. He wasnât dressing for anyone. Heâd leave it beâjust run a comb loosely through it and leave it. Just for tonight.

After all, he was only reading legal briefs tonightâwasnât he? Hardly worth donning his city lawyer image for.

He read one legal brief and paused.

Harryâ¦ Psychiatric assessment tomorrow.

Harryâ¦

It was nothing to do with him, he thought savagelyâdesperately. He couldnât help.

But in his heart, maybe he knew he could.

Heâd heard court cases before, submissions of social workers on why a child should be sent home to his parents or fostered or sent to a remand home. *This child is incapable of attachment.*

Borderline autism. Thereâs no point in attempting foster care. We believe institutional care is the only option.

Harry was only three years old and, if Shanni was rightâ¦if he *could* helpâ¦

Nick was in a position to guess that attachment was possible if they found a home where there was a decent male parent. Harry just needed his dad, Nick thought.

As he had.

That had nothing to do with it, he thought savagely. His own background was irrelevant. Think of practicalities. He shook off the feeling of wanting to stay right out of this and let himself remember how Harry had felt holding him close. Heâd hugged him all that long night of the hostage drama, and it hadnât just been Harry whoâd received comfort.

This was ridiculous!

Yes, but just talking to Wendy couldnât hurtâtelling Wendy if she wanted a statement then he was prepared to make it. It couldnât hurt to do that muchâand then steer clear. Andâ¦Shanni was at the movies.

It was only nine. Not too late. Decision made, he grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

With his hair still tousled.

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âIf itâll help then Iâll put that all in writing.â

âIt will.â Wendy stared across the table at her visitor, her eyes troubled. âThe only problem isâ¦â

âMmm?â

âYouâre saying he shouldnât be institutionalised because heâs capable of attachment. But youâre not willing to allow that attachment.â

âIâ¦no.â

âDo you know about our big brother scheme?â

âShanniâ¦Miss McDonald told me about it, yes.â

âAnd youâre not willing to be a part of it?â

âNo.â

âHmm.â She paused and regarded him across the table with knowing eyes. In silence.

Which Nick found vaguely unsettling. The woman was still

relatively young, close to thirty, maybe, but Nick knew instinctively that sheâd make a great house mother for troubled kids. She was sort ofâ¦comfortable. She had kindly eyes that crinkled from too much smilingâeyes that said she accepted all comers as she found them.

And she knew what she was seeing now. âYouâve had a tough time yourself,â she said softly, and Nick stared.

âHowâ¦?â

âHow do I know?â She spread her hands. âYou get to know the look. And Shanni told me.

âWhat on earth does Shanni know?â

âShe sees as much as I do.â Wendy smiled and pushed her fingers through her mass of dark curls. Sheâd tied them back into a knot but they were breaking free everywhere. âSheâs quite a girl. If thatâs all, thenâ¦â

âIs Harry asleep?â Now, why had he asked that?

âI doubt it.â She hesitated. âItâs hard to get him to sleep. He lies there for hours, just staring into the dark. But if youâre not willing to take this further then maybe itâs not such a good idea to prolong the agony.â

âThe agony?â

âHarry wants you,â she said simply. âHe cries to go to you. Thatâs why Shanni took him to lunch with you today.â And then she paused as she heard a car pull up outside. There was a click of the gate, and then a low laugh as someone greeted one of the older children. âSpeaking of whichâ¦here she is.â

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The first thing she saw was his hair.

Shanni burst in the door and stopped dead. Sheâd never expected that Nick would come. Sheâd been expecting Wendy, and Wendy was there, but so was Nick and this was a very different Nick. So far sheâd seen him groomed and immaculate and slick and smooth. Nowâ¦he was in casual trousers, a short-sleeved, open-necked shirt and his hair was tousled and thick and unruly.

She could see why he combed it down. Smoothed, it looked like the hairstyle of a barrister of the highest standing. Now it was a tousled mop, and he looked years younger. He didnât look like a magistrate, she thought. He lookedâ¦nice.

Nick wasnât nice, she told herself, strangely off-balance. He was a toad. All men were toads. John was toad number one but Nick was running a close second.

âHow was the movie?â he asked mildly, and she wrinkled her nose in distaste.

âLousy.â

âHow come?â Wendy smiled and rose to fetch more coffee. âWerenât you seeing the one about the runaway bride?â

âYesâbut it had a stupid ending. She didnât keep running.â

Wendy choked on laughter, then crossed to give her friend a hug. They were obviously very close. âHey, itâs okay. Maybe you and John can sort it out.â

âNo, we canât,â Shanni said darkly, hugging back. âHe wants a den.â

âWhatâs wrong with a man wanting a den?â Nick asked, startled, and got a glower for his pains.

âWe did house plans last night,â she explainedâas if he was a simpleton. âJohn has it all worked out. Three bedrooms, living room, kitchen for me and a den for him. Isnât that cosy?â

âA man needs a den,â Nick said, and found he now had two women glaring at him. Oh, helpâ¦

âI have a den,â said Wendy.

âWhy canât I have a den?â demanded Shanni. âChauvinist twit. But when I said that, John just laughedâlike I was being cute because what would the little woman want a den for? And then he told me to go and choose bathroom tiles. And then todayâ¦â

âI know what happened today,â Wendy said, and both of them stared at her.

âWell, if you will have your domestics in full view of the pierâ¦ Half the retired folk of the town listened in.â

âOh, great.â Nick groaned.

âI donât know why youâre complaining,â Shanni said crossly. âYou get to play magistrate for two years and then leave this place. Iâm stuck here for ever.â She helped herself from the coffee pot Wendy produced, sat down and stuck a thumb in the direction of Nick. âWhatâs he doing here?â

âRefusing to play big brother.â

âHey, Iâm signing an affidavit like Shanni wanted me to,â Nick said, stung. âWhat else do you want?â

âYou to go in and hug Harry goodnightâand promise youâll do the same tomorrow,â Wendy said promptly.

Silence.

âSee,â Shanni said morosely into her coffee. âTheyâre all useless.â

âThereâs reasons heâs like this,â Wendy said kindly. âHeâs got a past.â

âYeah, but if he had real courageâ¦â

âAre we talking about me, here,â Nick said carefully. âIf we are, then would you mind including me?â

âYou donât include anyone else,â Shanni retorted. âYou go on being solitary and weâll go on not communicating. Thatâs the way you like it.â

âShanniâ¦â

âIf I communicate with him he accuses me of setting my cap at him,â she told Wendy, ignoring him nicely. âAs if I would. The heroine in my movie had the right ideaâbut to give in at the end and marry one of the speciesâ¦ No!â

âI reckon you ought to try, though,â Wendy said thoughtfully. âCommunicating, I mean. Now heâs abandoned his smooth look he seems sort of cute.â

This was way out of hand. He was getting out of hereâfast.

âHe is cute,â Shanni admitted. âBut egoâ¦lawyer and judge and good looks combined. Phew!â

âAnd aloof,â Wendy said sadly. âPuts himself above everyone in this place. Bet he thinks heâs the greatest intellectual in town.â

âHeyâ¦â

âBet he never ever stays for weekends,â Wendy said. âWhatâs the bet heâs getting in his cute little car tomorrow and heading back to Melbourne for the weekend just as fast as he can drive? Because this place threatens him.â

âMmm.â Shanni nodded. âI canât say I blame him.â

âShanni!â Wendy stared. âHey, keep your end of the conversation going here, girl. I canât keep lawyer-bashing on my own.â

âBut it does get a bit claustrophobic.â Shanni was no longer looking at Nick. She was staring into the dregs of her coffee, her mind on her own problems. âWeâre having a family beach picnic on Sunday,â she explained morosely. âGrandpaâs seventieth

birthday. Theyâll be so sympatheticâor secretly pleased, which is worse.â

âBecause of you and John.â

âThe whole town thought we were getting married. Including John.â

âIncluding you?â Wendy prodded, and Shanni shrugged.

âYeah, I guessâ¦â

âSo take your new fella.â

âI donât have a new fella.â Shanni thumped her mug on the table. âWendy, will you stop it? Everyone thinks Nick and I ran straight into each otherâs arms, and the last thing I need is yet another man.â

âWhat about you?â Wendy said, wheeling to Nick and honing in like an arrow. âInterested?â

âNo!â

âThere you go, then,â she said, and sat back smugly, arms folded. âSo neither of you are interested in any sort of relationship, but both of you are interested in saving Harry. So thereforeâ¦â

âThereforeâ¦â Nick was being swept away here. This woman was too much for him. He was glad she didnât have a legal degree, he thought. Sheâd wipe the floor with him at the bar.

âSo therefore I can tell the assessor tomorrow that Harryâs developing relationships all over the place, and I can tell Harry that the two of you are taking him out on Sunday to Shanniâs family picnic.â

âNo!â they said in unison, and Wendy grinned at the twin sound of revulsion in their voices.

âWhy not? It means I have a promise I can use to put Harry to sleep at night. Itâll give me breathing space. If I can use the two of you âtil he relaxes with meâ¦â

âWendyâ¦â

âLook!â She was all earnestness now, fighting for one of her kids, and Nick knew his first assessment of her had been right. Sheâd give her all to make sure the kids she cared for had a chance. âI canât cope with Harry, now,â she admitted. âHe screams and he wonât let me near. I beg, cajole, hug, threaten, but nothing I say makes any difference. But if I say, âYou go to bed on time and you eat your dinner and you donât scream the

place down, then Shanni and Nick will take you out on a picnic on Sundayâ¦ââ

âIâm going back to Melbourne,â Nick said faintly.

âSo whatâs more important?â Wendy was fighting every way she knew how. âYour weekend in Melbourne? Or a little boyâs future? If I can settle him here, make the psychologist see that thereâs a chance he might settleâ¦â

âWendy, weâre not promising anything long-term,â Shanni said uneasily. âI mean, if he grows too attachedâ¦â

âYou tried to talk Nick into being big brother to him,â Wendy said sternly. âAnyone can see Nick wonât buy that sort of responsibility on his ownâheâs running scaredâso maybe you can convince him to share. Instead of a big brotherâwhy not brother and sister? What could be simpler than that?â

âMaybeâ¦â Shanni was dubious.

âAnd itâs even neutral,â Wendy said triumphantly. âNo sex at all.â

âOr not in front of the children.â Shanniâs irrepressible twinkle peeped out, and Nick groaned. Heck, this was his weekend they were talking about. This was stupid. There was no chance he was staying.

And then the door opened and a small face appeared, peering around as if he expected to be knocked back again. Harry was wearing pyjamas a couple of sizes too big for him, his fibreglass cast made them look ungainly and awkward, and his eyes were way too big for his face.

âMy Nickâs here,â he whispered, unbelieving, and Nickâs heart jerked with pain.

âYou should be in bed, young man,â Wendy said, crossing to scoop him up in her arms. He held himself rigid, arching back in a pose of rejection that Nick was starting to know.

âWhy is Nick here?â he whispered.

âHe came to invite you to lunch on Sunday. Would you like to go?â

Harryâs eyes swung to Nickâs. His face said he didnât believe a word.

âItâs true,â Nick said weakly, because there was nothing else to say. âSunday picnic. With Miss McDonald for her grandpaâs birthday.â

âShanni,â said Shanni. âYou can call me Shanni when weâre not at kindergarten. Would you like to come to the beach with us again, Harry?â

âYes.â It was one simple wordâbut it was almost like a sigh of relief.

âThen you have to promise to go straight to sleep, Harry, lad,â Wendy said sternly. âThree more sleeps until Sunday and no protests.â

âThree more sleepsâand then youâll come?â He was looking straight at Nick, his eyes searching for the truth.

âIâ¦yes.â

âWould you like to tuck him back into bed?â Wendy asked gently, and proffered the small body toward Nick

Nick froze.

But they were all looking at him. Wendy. Harry. And Shanni. He was on some sort of fence, he thought. One way was safetyâthe way he knew. The otherâthe other was the unknown, and the unknown scared the life out of him.

But still they looked at him, and Harryâs eyes said he expected nothing. Life had slapped him once too often to believe in happy endings. And he couldnât bear it.

âOkay, kid,â Nick said resignedly, and rose and accepted Harry from Wendyâs arms. Harryâs arms swept around his neck and clung. âWhereâs your bed? Show me.â

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âHeâs gorgeous.â

âYou said that about John.â Shanni poured herself more coffee and sank down opposite her friend.

âI lied. Johnâs a meat-head. Pleasant, kind, but a bitâ¦you knowâthe lights are on but no oneâs home.â

âAnd this guy?â

âThe lights are off and the doorâs locked but heâs home all right,â Wendy said. âHeâs all in there but heâs not letting it show. Heâs running scared.â

âIâm not exactly chasing him.â Shanni sighed. âHeck, the last thing I want is emotional entanglement. Especially not with some smart-alec city lawyer.â

âJust one step at a time,â Wendy said gently. âJust

concentrate on Harry. But if you can kill two birds with one stoneâ¦â

âI donât know what you mean.â

âI mean that man in there has been badly hurt in the past,â Wendy said sternly. âIt stands out a mile. In my profession you know the look, and you can see it as well as me. I reckon our magistrate needs Harry as much as Harry needs him.â

âI hope youâre right.â Shanni looked dubiously at her friend. âAnd I hope he sees it.â

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âI know Iâm right,â Wendy said to herself later as she closed her door on the pair of them. âI also think there are more needs here than Harryâsâand I hope youâre both wise enough to see it.â

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Shanni intended walking.

Nick expected Shanniâs car to be with his, but there was only his sports car parked outside.

âMum dropped me off here,â Shanni told him. âMy carâs got a cracked head, or something ghastly, and may be on its way to the car graveyard as we speak. The mechanics just shake their heads and groan every time I ask. So Mum drove me to the pictures, but I wanted to check on Harry afterwards. Iâm walking home.â

âWhereâs home?â

âA mile or so thataway.â

âA mile!â Nick looked out into the dark in the direction she was pointing. They were on the outskirts of town, and the road she was pointing to led northwards, into the dark âYou canât do that!â

âHey, this is Bay Beach,â she said, laughing. âYou donât get mugged in Bay Beach.â

âThere are weirdos everywhere. Does your mother know you intend walking?â

âI told her Iâd call a cab,â Shanni admitted. âBut I want to walk. I need to think.â

âYou donât walk.â

âIâm a big girl now.â

âAnd Iâm a criminal lawyer. A magistrate. I know whatâs out

there.â

âOh, scare me stupid, why donât you?â She shook her head, half-laughing, half-nervous. âCut it out.â

âGet in the car, Shanni,â he said heavily. Heâd seen too much in this job to let anyone take stupid risks. Especially Shanni! âDo your thinking when youâre safe in your own bed. Iâm taking you home.â

âI donâtâ¦â

âShanni, pleaseâ¦â

She stared at him for a long moment, hearing the trace of fear in his voiceâand then she silently climbed into his car.

She didnât know this man at all, she thought.

And she was almost fearful of the sensation.

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Shanniâs family farm was set back from the road, between the main road and the coast. The country was moonlit, and Nick could see that it was magnificentârolling hills, vast gum trees, and cattle standing peacefully in the moonlight.

âItâs lovely,â he said, and she cast him a wry look.

âHardly your cup of tea.â

âNo.â

âWhy did you come here?â she asked. Theyâd been silent all the way from town, but now, as the car pulled to a halt before the farmhouse verandah, she seemed to find her tongue.

âItâs the first step to becoming a judge. I donât want to stay a lawyer for ever,â he said, and unexpectedly she grinned.

âThen youâve taken the first step. Youâve stopped wearing your suit and tie. Congratulations.â

It was hard not to grin back. Her smile was infectious. âItâs back to suits tomorrow.â

âMagistrates donât need suits. They needâ¦I donât know. Knowledge. Wisdom. Compassion.â

âFailing all that, suits will have to do.â

âHmm.â She shook her head at him. He cut the engineâshe should get outâbut the night was still and warm and there was this thing between them that needed examiningâ¦

âItâs a shame,â she said softly, âto wear such severe suits, to flatten that gorgeous hairâ¦â Then, before he could do anything to stop her, her hand came out and touched his head. She was

running her fingers through his tousled curls as if she couldnât help herself. âItâs great hair. Lovely hair. Do you take after your mother or father?â

âI have no idea.â The feeling of her fingers in his hair was weird. It set every nerve in his body alight. He found himself clenching his hands on the steering wheel, staring out at the night beyond and trying to halt the flood of sensations coursing through his body.

âI see.â Silence. Thenâ¦ âSo Wendyâs right.â

âWendy sticks her nose where it has no business being.â His voice sounded as strained as he felt.

âMaybe,â Shanni agreed. âBut, then, Wendyâs like a judge. Knowledgeable. Wise. And kind. Like you intend to be.â

âI donât know about that.â He stirred and shifted his handsâand clenched them again on the wheel.

âWhy donât you know your parents?â

He shrugged. âI have vague memories of my mother. She had a different hair colour every time she visited me, though. Who can say if she looked like me?â

âYou didnât live with her?â

âNot often. Mostly I lived in foster homes. She wouldnât let me be adopted.â

âOh, Nickâ¦â

âHeck, weâre not feeling sorry for me, here,â he said savagely. It was a long time since heâd railed against the unfairness of his past. âIâve had a very good life, thank you very much. Some great foster homes.â

âMany?â

âA dozen or so. My mother kept arriving and deciding sheâd take me back. For a week or so. Or sheâd just make so much fuss the foster parents thought I was too much trouble.â He smiled without humour, staring out at the dark. âMy mother and I have a very low tolerance rate. Domesticityâs not my scene.â

âNot your motherâs scene?â

âAs you say.â

âAnd now youâre set to be a judge.â

âGreat, isnât it? His voice was self-mocking. âBack-street kid makes good.â

âYouâve fought for this?â

âEvery way I know how,â he told her, and there was no way he could stop the icy determination from his voice. âEvery waking minute. I rememberâ¦â

âYou remember what?â She was almost whispering.

And he told her. It must have been the night, he told himself later. The warmth of the evening, and the scent of the garden and the eucalypts towering over them with the stars glimmering through. Orâ¦the warmth drifting between.

Orâ¦ It must have been that she was a listenerânot like any other woman heâd gone out with. He only knew he had to talkâand talk of something heâd never talked about in his life before.

âI remember sitting in court,â he said, and he was speaking almost to himself, his voice half-mocking. âI was about seven. Iâd spent a month with my mother and the welfare authorities got an injunction to take me away. I wasâ¦neglected, to say the least. So they were all in courtâmy motherâher boyfriendâmy motherâs neighboursâsocial workers Iâd never met before. And they all were saying what should happen to me.â

âSo?â Her voice was gentle.

âSo I remember looking up at the judge and he just saidâ¦he just said what would happen. No argument and it was the right thing. It was what I wanted, and it meant I got fed again and got to go to school. So I figuredâ¦right then and there I figuredâ¦that that was what I was going to be. Someone who could say what would happen.â

âOh, Nickâ¦â

âPretty silly reason for wanting to be a judge, huh?â he said, still in that self-mocking voice. Good grief, he was pathetic.

But she didnât think so. Shanni was saying nothing, just sitting watching him with eyes that were almost luminescent in the dark. There was a glimmer on her lashes that could almost have been tears.

âHeyâ¦â

âI think thatâs the best reason Iâve ever heard for wanting to be a judge, Nick Daniels,â she said in a choked voice. âAnd now youâve made it.â

âI want high-court judge,â he said, and his voice firmed.

âWonât magistrate at Bay Beach do? Or county-court judge?

Our last judge stayed thirty years.â

âThirty years!â His tone told her what he thought of that. âNo chance. Two years and Iâm out of here.â

âCountry gets under your skin.â She couldnât stop a note of bitterness creeping into her own voice then. âThough Iâd have to agree that sometimes the place can even get to me.â

âSometimes even you want to get away?â

âSometimes,â she admitted. âThis week will be hard.â

âBecause?â

âIn case you havenât noticed,â she retorted, âI threw away a perfectly good marriage proposition this afternoon. The news will be all over the town by now. Johnâs a very nice person.â

âHeâs a stuffed shirt.â

She grinned at that. âYes. You see it. I see it now, too, but the town sees a very nice boy who Iâve thrown over for nothing. John will be getting sympathy and Iâll get the Wicked Witch Of The West treatment. Apart from my familyâwhoâll be so pleased that Iâll want to slug them.â

âWhy?â

âDo you enjoy people telling you, âI told you soâ?â she demanded bitterly. âNo? Neither do I. My family saw the stuffed shirt bit before I did.â Then she paused as, up on the verandah, a light fluttered, shifted and died against the shadows. The bitterness increased. âOh, no. I might have known.â

âYou might have known what?â

âI have three teenage brothers and sisters,â she said, sighing and lifting her purse from the seat in readiness to leave. âTheyâre all in the front room right now, and theyâre spying on us. Iâll go in and theyâll be all over meâtheyâll be so sympathetic about John and theyâll be so avid for information about youâ¦â

Itâd drive him nuts. âYou donât ever think of moving out?â

âOh, yeah.â She jeered gently into the night. âApartments are hardly thick on the ground in Bay Beach, and everyone would think weâd fought, and my mother would be hurt, andâ¦â She glowered at the moving curtains, and then sighed. âAnd Iâd miss them.â

âIâm glad I donât have a family.â

That got to her. Her eyes widened in the dusk. No! âNick, you donât know what youâre saying,â she whispered. She turned to

him, shaken out of her self-pity, and she took both of his hands in hers in urgent entreaty. âTo not want a familyâ¦ Nick, you just donât knowâ¦â

Then she took a deep breath, seemed to collect herself and she pulled away. Sheâd taken this too far. Exposed wounds she had no hope of healing. âTh-Thank you for the ride home. Will I see you on Sunday?â

âI guess.â He smiled then, and softened. âIâll be here. Shall I call for you at eleven and weâll collect Harry together?â

âHeâll like that.â

And so will I, Nick thought suddenly. To leave her now with no future date in store would be hard. Shanni wasnât his sort, of course. Not as beautiful as the sophisticated women he normally dated. Butâ¦she was soft, warm, compassionateâ¦

She was getting under his skin!

âYouâd best go in,â he said uneasily, flicking a glance up at the shifting curtains. âYouâll be getting a reputation.â

âTheyâve been watching me for ever,â she snapped. âThey drive me nuts. As if Iâd ever do anything interestingâ¦â

It was the way she said it. She didnât say it flatlyâshe said it with longing. *As if Iâd ever do anything interestingâ¦*â

What did she want?

And suddenly he knewâor maybe it was what he wanted.

He laughed, a soft, carefree laugh that had her staring. âOkay, then, Miss Uninteresting Miss McDonaldâ¦letâs do something to give our audience a show. If youâre willingâ¦â His dark eyes dared her in the moonlight and then, before she knew or could guess what he intended, he took her into his arms and he kissed her.

CHAPTER SIX

THIS wasnât just a kiss.

This was a *kiss*!

It wasnât meant to be a kiss of friendship, a soft kiss of farewell, or even a kiss of the start of a love affair. This was passion meant for an audience. Nick had sized up three watching pairs of eyes and he knew what they most wantedâso he gave it to them in full.

His sports car was open to the weather and to their audience. The seats were wide and soft, and there was a good eighteen inches between driver and passenger. No more. Nick took a deep breath, turned to the lady beside him, put his hands on her shouldersâand kissed.

She leaned back with shockâand he leaned back with her, so they fell together onto the soft leather. She gave a squeak of astonishment. Their mouths met fleetingly as they disappeared underneath the dashboardâdisappearing completely from view.

Then Nick lifted his face from hers momentarilyâheâd had to stifle her squeak somehow, and kissing her properly was the only way to do it. âPut your feet up high,â Nick whispered urgently before she could squeak again. âA bit of stocking above the dash for the audience. Come on, Shanni, letâs give them their moneyâs worth.â

For a moment he didnât think sheâd respond. Her body was rigid in his holdâshocked into immobility. Not for long, though. This was one smart lady, and her sense of humour was always bubbling just below the surface.

As somehow heâd known it would be, he thought. It was as if he knew her without knowing her, as if something in his mind read hers and understood. As heâd known it wouldâor heâd hoped.

And it happened. He felt laughter ripple though her body in a lovely long chuckle, and her arms came around him and held him fast. She leaped right into the act with a vengeance.

âOh, Nick,â she murmured at full passion, her voice ringing out into the still, night air, carrying right up to the verandah and into the open window beyond. âNickâ¦darlingâ¦â

âShanniâ¦â His mouth was inches from hersâonce under the dash he could withdraw just a little. Laughter was bubbling inside him as well. âA wiggle, I think,â he whispered urgently. âA kick?â

And she did. With delight he felt her body shift under his. Her legs raised above dashboard heightâshe was wearing a flowing skirt, for heavenâs sake, and her legs were silk-stockingedâand he felt her wiggle like crazy. Her feet waved back and forth like flags, as if she was riding a bicycle upside down. Inside the house, the siblings would be pop-eyed.

âOh, Nickâ¦â she groaned out loud. âNick, Nickâ¦kiss me, kiss meâ¦â

He choked with admiration and laughter, and he looked down into her laughing eyes.

And that was a mistake.

They were so lovelyâ¦

He was meant to be kissing the girl for a joke! She was laughing up at him, her stockinged feet were wiggling in the air and her eyes were alight with merriment. She was holding him, his body was pressed against hers and her breasts were moulding into his. Her laughing mouth was inches from his and she was so lovelyâ¦

And suddenly her mouth wasnât inches from his. It was right under his, and his mouth was on hers and he was kissing herâbut he was kissing her as if there really was passion between them. As if this was a man making love to the most beautiful woman in the worldâinstead of an irrepressibly ridiculous small-town kindergarten teacher who wanted to tease her brothers and sister.

And Shanni had frozen againâbut she froze only for one moment.

She could feel it too, he thought dazedly. Whatever was between them was shared, and it was something that was more powerful than either of them. This like-minded stuffâ¦it was drawing them closer and closer, so her lovely laughing eyes merged with the twinkling of the stars and the feel of her body with his.

And night and girl and desire were all merging into one, and Nick was kissing her as if heâd never let her leave himâas long as they both should live.

âShanni!â

It couldnât last, of course. How could it not end? Not with such an audience. The front door banged wide and a male voice shouted down to them from the verandah. âShanni, is that you?â

She didnât push away. Not instantly. For one tiny second they stayed together, and that fraction of an instant told Nick that Shanni was as reluctant to finish the kiss as he was.

But needs must. She pushed him back, and her eyes searched his in the dim light. And then she smiled, and if there was a trace of uncertainty in her smile it was replaced fast by laughter.

âOh, Nickâ¦what have you done? My reputation, for-soothâ¦â

âWhat have *I* done? What have *you* done?â Somehow he managed laughter in return. âWicked Witch of the West and Scarlet Woman to boot.â

She grinned, hauling herself up to sit decorously again, smoothing her skirt over her knees as both their heads reappeared above the dashboard for the observers to see.

âYouâre the seducer here,â she said primly. âI can see the headlines now. âMagistrate Seduces Innocent Kindergarten Teacher in Sports Car.â Youâll be tarred and feathered and run out of town.â

âI could be so lucky!â

She heard it thenâthe faint trace of bitterness in his voice. So he really did want to leave, she thought, and he wanted it badly. Butâ¦she couldnât focus on Nick any longer. Her father was out on the verandah, staring down at the couple in the car, and her mother was following close behind.

âHi,â she managed, smiling up at her father. âItâs me, Dad. Nick gave me a ride home.â

âSo I see.â The farmerâs voice said he had a shotgun right behind him and heâd use it if necessary. To Nickâs amazement, Shanni didnât blush or try to defend herself. She chuckled again and swung herself out of the car.

âDonât get your knickers in a twist, Dad. We had an audience.â She gestured to the curtain, where three faces had now appeared full-on. Her three youngest siblings. âNick thought we ought to give them a show for their money.â

âOhâ¦â Guy McDonald looked sideways at his three youngest children, worry fading as he saw what had happened. And he grinned. So this was where Shanni got her sense of humour. âI see. So you shocked them to the core. Well done. You want to come in for coffee, young fella?â

âIâ¦no. I need to get back.â Unlike Shanni, Nick wasnât in control at all. Something had happened during that kiss, and he wasnât at all sure he knew what it was. He needed to get back to town and sort out what he was feeling. Orâ¦sort out that he was feeling *nothing*!

Which he must be.

âNickâs coming with us on Sunday, Dad,â Shanni said. She left the car, climbed the verandah steps, then stood between her parents and smiled back down at him. âTo Grandpaâs birthday picnic. Weâre bringing Harry.â

âThatâs nice, dear,â her mother said placidly.

Did nothing shock these people?

No. It couldnât. Nick looked up at them. Guy McDonaldâs arm was around his daughterâs shoulders, her mother was standing beside her with affection written clearly on her face, and the three young faces were still bobbing up and down at the window and grinning like three clownsâand Nick suddenly knew what it was he was seeing. This family loved their Shanni, and they loved her absolutely. Anything she chose to do would be okay by them.

The knowledgeâthe sensationâwas suddenly almost claustrophobic. Heâd never known a love like this. Never! And here she was, surrounded. Shanni was like an alien creature, he thought. She was totally apart from the world he lived in.

âIâll see you Sunday, then,â he said abruptly, and he flicked on the engine and spun the car around too fast in the driveway. A half-grown collie pup, heading down from the verandah to investigate, yelped and scurried for cover and Nick had to brake to avoid hitting him. Which sort of spoiled his dignified exit.

He made his exit anyway. He didnât look backâbut Shanni and her parents stood on the verandah and watched him drive away, and he could feel their eyes follow him all the way into town.

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âHeâs not your sort, is he dear?â Shanniâs mother had no sooner closed the kitchen door and put the kettle on than she was into probe mode. Nick had been right. Anything Shanni chose to do was okay with her parents, but that didnât mean they didnât enquire.

âIt was a joke, Mum,â Shanni said mildly, and her mother flashed her a look that said she wasnât stupid.

âYour Johnâs been telling the town youâve thrown him over for the magistrate.â

âJohnâs a chauvinist twitâand heâs not *my* John.â

âHeâs a very worthy person,â her mother said sternly. Then a matching twinkle to her daughterâs flashed into her older eyes. âBut youâre right. He lacks a sense of humour, poor John. Your father and I are very relieved that youâve finally seen it. Itâs onlyâ¦â

âYou think Iâm jumping from the frying pan into the fire?â

âI would never have called John a frying pan.â Her mother chuckled and Shanni had to smile. âBut maybeâ¦â

âMaybe nothing.â Shanni took a deep breath. âIâm a big girl now, Mum, and Iâm not looking to get involved with a magistrate. Especially one whoâs carrying the scars Nick is. But Harry thinks Nick is great and if I can get a relationship going between themâ¦ That baby needs someone who cares.â

âYou care.â

âHarry needs a male.â

âHe needs a daddyâand where thereâs a daddy thereâs usually a mother, too.â

âOh, for heavenâs sakeâ¦â Shanni glowered, half-laughing, half-indignant. âMum, I am *not* interested in Nick Daniels. Got it?â

âYes, dear,â her mother said, and Shanni knew she didnât believe a word of it.

And maybeâ¦maybe she didnât either.

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And Nick?

Nick drove home feeling more claustrophobic than heâd felt in his life before. All he wanted to do was to turn his car to head for the city and never come back.

Or was it? Wasnât it that he wanted to turn the car and return to Shanni?

No! He wanted to leave this town!

Which was really stupid. His career plans said he had to stick this place out for two years, and so far heâd done less than a week. Great! And heâd be welcomed back to the city with open armsâhe didnât think!

If he appeared back in chambers next Monday morning theyâd assume heâd failed. His long-term plan was high-court judge, and this was step one. He had to take it.

He didnât want to stay. He didnât want this involvement! Not with the childâor the girl.

He could concentrate on being a fine barrister, he thought desperately, and there was a possibility he could move sideways to the high courtâ¦

Ha! Heâd looked at that option and he knew it depended hugely on luck. What he was doing now was the most certain way to get where he wanted. Put in the hard work, Abe had told him, and Abe was right.

Which meant putting up with country lifeâputting up with the gossip and the peopleâand staying uninvolved. But, for heavenâs sake, heâd only been here for a few days and already he was involved up to his neck. He should ring Shanni and tell her their Sunday date was off.

âI do not want to go on a family picnic with a baby and a gorgeous girl and her grandma and grandpa and her brothers and sistersâ¦â

Yes, he did. Sort ofâ¦

He wanted to be there, he knew, but he wanted to walk away at the end, heart-whole and fancy-free.

But he was starting to think there was no way that could happen, and the thought scared him witless.

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Friday and Saturday were endless. Even the witnesses and defendants in court seemed to know what was happening in his life and to be summing him up.

âThey think youâre turning the place upside down,â Mary told him at the break of a long and boring case deciding whether

a farmerâs cows were damaging an access road. âYou arrive, weâve had a hostage drama which will keep the district talking for years, the kindergarten teacher has broken off with her intendedâ¦â

âHe wasnât her intended.â

âJohn sure intended, even if Shanni didnât. And nowâ¦the kids have spread it all over town that their sisterâs in love with you.â

Theyâd asked for that with their kissing stunt in the car, Nick thought wryly, and grimaced.

âIâm darned if I can see why everyone thinks itâs their business.â

âThis is Bay Beach,â Mary said simply. âEverythingâs everyoneâs business. Speaking of whichâ¦â

âDonâtâ¦â

But she was unstoppable. âI meant to tell you before this case startedâ¦ Bill Nuggins could quite easily drive his cows to the dairy across his back paddock instead of using the road. Heâs using the road because the folk bought the place next door as a weekend home and he wanted to buy it himself. So now he likes the idea of them having to drive through cow dung.â

âGee, thanks.â This was useful information but it wasnât up to his clerk of court to give it to him.

âThink nothing of it,â she said blandly. âTheyâre nice people and heâs giving them a hard time so I thought you should know. Iâm off after this, so Iâll see you Sunday at the picnic. Oh, and youâd best make your mind up about Shanni. Sheâs not one to tread water very long.â

What did she mean by that?

Nick didnât know, and he couldnât allow himself to care.

But he did care, and not just about Shanni. He finished workâadvising the farmer to re-route his cowsâtook himself for a solitary walk on the beach and found his feet taking him to Harryâs home. It was bedtime, and Wendy greeted him as if sheâd been expecting him.

âHeâs been waiting for you.â

âI didnât say Iâd come.â

âHe knew you would.â

Nick figured heâd have to ignore that. Its implications were

enormous. âHow did the assessment go today?â

âWeâre giving him another two weeks,â she said. âIf he doesnât settle by thenâ¦â She left the words unspoken but Nick knew exactly what she was saying. If Nick hadnât pulled off a miracleâ¦

He shouldnât be here!

But, despite his reservations, he sat by the little boyâs bed and read him a story about a *Very Dirty Dog* until Harryâs eyes closed in weariness and he slipped into sleep. There was nothing else to do. And Harry needed himâ¦

âHeâs so little and his bodyâs still healing,â Wendy told him as he emerged, surprised by how ready for sleep Harry had been. âHe needs an afternoon sleep but he wonât let himself relax. Heâs exhausted but he fights sleep every inch of the way.â

Why did that sound familiar? *If he closed his eyes, then things could happen. Bad things.* Nick remembered the sensation all too clearly. The world wasnât a safe place to sleep inâ¦

âShanniâs taking him clothes-shopping tomorrow morning,â Wendy told him, closing the door on the sleeping child. She was carrying a little girl on her hip and there were two older boys making hot chocolate in the kitchen. Much as Wendy might care for Harry, there were limits to the personal attention he could get here, and Shanni must know it. âSheâs picking him up at ten. Would you like to go with them?â

âNo.â Nick shook his head. âIâm busy.â

But the next day it took an iron will to keep him reading legal briefs in his apartment when he knew theyâd be shopping. He had to read the briefsâif he didnât keep up with the legal world heâd turn into a country bumpkinâbut Shanni and Harry were out choosing clothes without him and for some reason the thought was deeply disturbing.

This was crazy! He was going nuts.

One week down, he thought desperately. One hundred and three to goâ¦

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Beach day. Grandpaâs birthday.

Nick woke at six and spent an hour composing urgent messages telling Shanni why he had to go to the city right now. Then he went for a jog on the beach, thought of a few more

messages, showered, composed a few moreâ¦

Combed his hair flat. City-lawyer style.

Picked up the phone. Put down the phone.

Headed back to the shower, washed his hair again. Dressed. Combed his hair roughly and allowed his curls to dry any which way.

Went to collect Shanni.

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âI was expecting you to cry off.â

âWere you?â He cast her a sideways glance. Shanni had been waiting on the verandah as heâd driven into the farmyard and she looked absolutely, breathtakingly lovely. She was simply dressed in a pink halter-neck top, the briefest of brief pink shorts and simple sandals. Her hair was sort of tousled and bunched on top. Her look was a million miles from that of any woman heâd dated in the cityâand she looked a million dollars.

She wasnât his style. No!

âI was expecting myself to cry off,â he admitted. âThis isnât my scene.â

She grinned, teasing. âChicken.â

âIâd rather be a chicken than a dead hen.â He said it flippantly enough, staring at the road ahead, but she wasnât fooled for a minute. She looked at him for a long moment as he steered back onto the highway, and the smile she gave him became sympathetic.

âHey, weâre not that scary,â she said softly. âDonât judges get to face murderers, gang lords and drug barons? Whatâs a family picnic compared to that?â

What indeed? So there was no reason at all why his insides were telling him this was much, much scarier.

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Harry was waiting, too, standing stolidly on the front porch with Wendy, with a look on his face that said he hadnât expected them to arrive at all. He didnât smile when he saw them, but the look of resignation lightened just a little, and when Wendy walked him to the car he didnât drag behind. He looked straight ahead, staring directly and unwaveringly at Nickâas if he was

still expecting him to drive off fast.

Then he paused and looked at Nickâs carâseeing it for the first time. The lightness faded, fear flooding back.

âI donât want to goâ¦â he whispered.

âHarry doesnât like cars,â Wendy said, allowing him no time for protests but scooping him up and lifting him into Nickâs minuscule back seat. âBut sometimes itâs the only way to get where you want to go. Right Nick?â

âRight.â Nick turned and gave Harry a reassuring grin. There were two of them in this together, then. Two males who were both scared to death. And there was nothing for it but to go forward. Concentrate on something else but the fearâ¦

âHey, I like your shirt,â he told Harry, starting the engine and giving Shanni a sideways glance that begged for help.

He didnât need it. His comment was, apparently, exactly the right thing to say.

âMmm.â Harry put his chin deep down on his chest and tried not to look pleased.

âWe bought it yesterday,â Shanni told him. âHarry and I went shopping for clothes, didnât we, Harry? Itâs a swimming T-shirt.â

âSo I see.â The little boyâs shirt had fish and sharks and octopuses all over it. Nick approved absolutely. âItâs a fine choice for today.â

âYour hair looks funny,â Harry said.

âYeah.â It did tooâand it felt funny. Nick put his fingers up and raked his curls self-consciously. He felt exposed like this. Weird.

âBut itâs a fine choice for today, too,â Shanni said solidly, and Nick looked across at herâand grinned. Maybe it didnât feel so bad after all.

âNickâs shirtâs a bit boring, though,â she told Harry. âDonât you think?â

âHeyâ¦â

âIâm wearing pink spots and youâre wearing fish,â she went on, confining her conversation to the child in the back. âYouâd think Nick could have found a shirt to wear that wasnât white.â

âItâs short-sleeved,â Nick said, protesting. âIâm not wearing a tie. Itâs fine.â

âItâs white. Do magistrates have to wear white?â

âYes. Always.â In truth, he owned nothing else.

âIâll bet they donât,â Shanni said thoughtfully. âWhat do you reckon, Harry? I think Nick would look better in pink spots. Do you?â

Silence.

Then, to Nickâs absolute astonishment, Harry chuckled.

At first he thought heâd imagined it. Shanni, too, looked as if sheâd been struck by lightning as the childâs rich chuckle slowly formed and echoed around them.

They looked at each other. Nick and Shanniâ¦ Co-conspirators in lighting this childâs life.

And then, slowly, Shanniâs face broke into a smile that said all her Christmases had come at onceâand then some.

âPink,â she said, and if her voice was choked with emotion, then who could blame her. âIâm buying our Nick a pink-spotted shirt first thing tomorrow morning, and no one in the whole world is going to stop me.â

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And, after that, there was nothing to do but enjoy the day and accept that things were out of his control.

Shanniâs extended family was enormous, with assorted cousins, aunts, nieces and nephews, boyfriends and hangers-on like himself, all equally welcomed into the chaos. There were kids and dogs and food and more food. There was beach cricket, swimming, sandcastlesâ¦ Nick was drawn into the fray the minute he arrived.

Heâd worn his swimming shorts under his clothes; his trousers and shirt were hauled from him by Rob the moment he arrived, half a gallon of sun lotion was slapped over him, Harryâs cast was tied in an enormous plastic bag to keep it clean, and he and Harry were declared official cricket umpires.

âMagistrate work,â Rob decreed, and Shanni chuckled and disappeared toward the water.

âThatâs right. Make him useful.â

There was part of Nick that wanted to follow Shanniâbut she didnât look back.

Then they were made sandcastle judges.

âBiggest is not best, either,â Shanni told him in passing as she

headed to prepare the picnic. It was almost as if she was avoiding him.

And it kept happening.

After lunch Harry was scooped up and placed on a floating air-bed, the towrope was put in Nickâs hand and he was sent out to sea with his passenger. And Shanni, again, was elsewhere. The family assumed Nick was here with Harryânot with Shanni. Nick found the sensation odd. Not bad butâ¦odd.

He was accustomed to women taking notice of himâto women sticking as close as Harryâbut Shanni wasnât sticking at all. To Shanni he seemed just one of the mob. She was taking Maryâs kids out to sea on their own air-beds, she was swimming races, diving, surfacing for air, laughing with delight whether she won or lost, and then setting up the next race.

Then she swooped in and made her own sandcastleâwhen he and Harry were batting at cricket, with Nick guiding the little boyâs hands.

Anything he was doing, she wasnât.

It finally started to rile him. By mid-afternoon he was sure it wasnât happening by accident. He could watch her all he wanted, but only from a distance. And she was so lovelyâ¦

âYouâll have to move fast,â Mary said into his ear, and he jumped. Heâd been a million miles away. Harry was settled on a towel by his side, three-quarters asleep and leaning heavily against him in sleepy contentment. They were sated with sun, sand and picnic, and Nick was finding it as hard as Harry to focus.

But while Harry was finding it hard to focus on anything, Nick was simply finding it hard to focus on anything that wasnât Shanni.

âIâ¦what do you mean?â For some reason it was hard to get his voice working.

âJust what I said.â Mary plonked herself down on a towel and looked affectionately over at her sister. âThereâs never much of a gap between Shanniâs men.â

âI donât know what businessâ¦â

âThere never is for any of the McDonald girls,â Mary said smugly, ignoring his interruption and looking across at her

husband with affection. âTheyâre always snapped up, by the most gorgeous of men. My Mike included.â

âMaryâ¦â

âTake me, for instance,â she said placidly. âI was married at nineteen and I could have been married a whole heap earlier if I hadnât been very, very fussy.â She motioned across to where Louise and her young man were building a sandcastle together. âIâm betting this little sister wonât be far behindâshe and Alastair canât keep their eyes off each otherâand Hatty already has boyfriends even though sheâs only fifteen. Itâs only Shanni whoâs slow on the uptake, and thatâs because she canât choose.â

âI donâtâ¦â

âEleven proposals,â Mary said sagely, shaking her head at the wonder of it. âAnd thatâs just the serious ones. Itâs now starting all over again. Mum tells me, since the town found out Johnâs a thing of the past, the phoneâs been running hot.â

âYour sisterâs very attractive,â Nick said stiffly, and Mary chuckled.

âShe is and all.â

âI donâtâ¦â he started, but she shook her head.

âYou do, so why not admit it?â she said, rising and shaking the sand from her towel. âUgh. Iâm coated.â And then she fixed Nick with a stern look. âBut, whatever you do, do it fast. Because, as I said, thereâs a queue.â

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She would not go near him.

Shanni was aware of the eyes of her family on herâwhat had started out as a joke had them all so interested it was almost sickening. They were agogâand she wasnât interested!

She wasnât!

If only Nick wasnât soâ¦wasnât soâ¦

Different.

And that difference was impossible to define. In so many ways he was the same as other men sheâd gone out with. He had a great grinâyes, it was wonderful. But other men had great grins. He was strongâhe must have swum since toddlerhoodâhis lean figure had towed Harry effortlessly on his floating mat and heâd won every race with her various male cousins. Butâ¦other

men were strong.

And tenderâ¦ He was amazingly tender. The way he had lifted Harry, the way he had put sun lotion on the little boy and wiggled patterns down the childâs back, making him squeal in delight. The way heâd said something great about every kidâs sandcastleâ¦

Other men were great with kids.

It was more than that. It was the way he just was. The way he was justâ¦Nick.

She saw so much that she knew he didnât want anyone to see: the way he looked at Harry, as if he couldnât believe he was committing himself, the way he looked around at her family, as if he was hungering for something heâd never had, and yet wanted so badly, the way he looked at herâ¦

The way she seemed to know what was right there in his heart.

It scared her rigid. Andâ¦all her family were watching.

She wasnât interested. She *wasnât*!

She avoided him like the plague.

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It was almost dusk as they drove home. Theyâd eaten tea on the beachâShanniâs grandpa had ordered pizzas, and one of the enduring images Nick would take home from this day was the pizza delivery boy hiking over sand-hills with a dozen or more boxes balanced precariously before him.

Then Shanniâs mum had produced a birthday cake, grandpa had blown out seventy candles, the birthday song had been bellowed by the entire family and the day had been declared officially over.

And it had left Nick feelingâ¦empty? As if heâd been allowed to glimpse something that could never be his.

Heâd half expected to go home alone with Harry, but as heâd put the little boy into the carâhe was already fast asleepâShanni had emerged from the crowd of her family and tossed her bag in beside him.

He was therefore deemed her chauffeur. According to Mary, he should feel honoured.

He didnât. He just feltâ¦more empty. As if he was being

allowed more insight into what could never be his.

âCat got your tongue?â She smiled at him as he started the engine. Her hair was escaping every which way from her crazy topknot, she was sand-coated, her nose was pink-tipped from too much sunâand he had an almost overwhelming urge to stop the car and kiss her.

He did no such thing. The emptiness was almost tangible. But emptiness was his life. It was what he was accustomed to, and he didnât know how the heck to cope with anything else.

So he steered the car toward the town and he clenched his hands on the steering wheel and he said nothing.

For a few minutes she watched him in matching silence. âNick, whatâs wrong?â she asked at last, and the teasing tone had become serious.

âNothing.â

âWhen I say that to my kindergarten students and they say, ânothing,â it usually means theyâve just made a puddle.â

He grinned at that. âMiss McDonald, I can assure you that I havenât made a puddle.â

âIâm very glad to hear it.â She looked at him for a long moment, questioning, and then gave a slight shrug and turned to look over her shoulder at the sleeping Harry. âHeâs had a wonderful day,â she said softly.

âYes,â

âAnd you, Nick? Youâve had a good time?â

âIâ¦yes.â

âIâm glad,â she said warmly, probing no deeper. âMy family think youâre great.â

âBecause Iâm not John?â

âThere is that.â She chuckled. âOh, dear. I was a twit for thinking I could marry him.â

âThereâll be other fish in the sea.â

âI guessâ¦â Her voice faded. âNickâ¦â

âMmm?â

She looked across at him as if she was about to ask something, thought better of it and pressed her lips together. More silence. Then the town boundary came into view, and it was say something now or the opportunity would be over.

âWill you see Harry again?â she asked.

âI donât know,â he said stiffly. âNot for a while.â

âBecause youâre busy,â she agreed cordially. âI guess.â

âI need to go to Melbourne next weekend.â

âTo change suits and ties? I hoped youâd kicked the habit.â

He grinned at that. âYes, okay. Iâve kicked the habit. But I do have another life.â

âYou have a girlfriend in town?â

âNo.â

âI see.â She didnât see at all. She stared ahead as the car turned into the street leading to the childrenâs home. Time was running out. It was now or neverâ¦

âNick, Harryâs dad took him to Melbourne every weekend,â she said, her voice suddenly urgent. âHe worked here in the timber mill, but every Friday night he and Harry headed for the city. Harryâs grandmother lived there.â

âHe has a grandmother?â

âShe died just before Peter did. But Harry still remembers going to the city.â

âAre you suggesting,â Nick said slowly, thinking this through, âthat I take Harry to Melbourne?â

âI donât see why not. I think heâd love it.â

âI canât cope with a baby on my own.â

She thought about that and shook her head. âOf course you can.â She was all decisive now, right back into the bossy mode Nick was starting to know and, he had to admit, enjoy. âYouâre a clever, competent man, Nick Daniels, and Harry is one very small boy. You can cope if you want.â

âThen I donât want,â he said bluntly. Harry in his favourite restaurants or with his sophisticated friends? No and no and no.

But now Shanni was looking at him as if heâd personally betrayed her.

He couldnât let it matter, he told himself desperately. He couldnât let her drag him into this mess so that he was personally involved.

But yetâ¦ As he stopped the car and went to lift the sleeping Harry from the back seat, he was aware of a lurch of pain in his gut.

Harry was so small. His cast looked so heavy and there were shadows of tiredness on his pale little face. He stirred in sleep, his eyes fluttered open and he smiled, just ever so faintly, as he

saw who was carrying him. Then his eyes fell closed again and he relaxed absolutely in Nickâs arms.

Nick might not want to get personally involvedâbut he was already.

He had to walk away.

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And with Harry safely left in Wendyâs chargeâthe little boy hadnât stirred as they washed him and popped him into bedâhe had to take Shanni home. Another five minutes in the car. Get this over with fast, he told himself harshly. Move on.

But as the car pulled into the farmyard he was aware of a stab of absolute longingâto somehow prolong the moment.

âIâ¦they tell me itâs the mayoral ball on Friday week,â he told her, and he was speaking too fast. Which confused him totally. For heavenâs sake, he didnât mess up invitations. Where was the smooth Nick Daniels now? âI gather Iâm expected to attend. I donât suppose youâd like to go with me?â

She stared at him for a long minute, considering.

âIsnât that a bit dangerous?â she said at last, her teasing voice back. âYouâd be expected to dance with me.â

âDancingâs okay.â

âJust not emotion.â

âI guess.â

She sighed and shook her head, teasing fading. âNope. This is never going to work. You wonât even let a tiny little boy touch your life.â

âHey, Iâm not asking for emotional entanglement here,â he said, startled. âJust a date.â

âI know youâre not asking for emotional entanglement.â She sounded angry, and he stared.

âWhatâs wrong? Youâre upset that I wonât take Harry to Melbourne next weekend?â

She tilted her chin. âYes,â she said flatly. âI am. You have the chance to do so much good, Nick Daniels, and you darenât do it because of your precious independence. You wonât take a riskâand Harry suffers because of it.â

âSo if I said Iâd take Harry to Melbourne then youâd come to the ball with me?â

It was the wrong thing to say and he knew it the moment the words were uttered. She drew in her breath in a sharp, angry hiss and she drew away from him, her anger tangible in the still night air.

She was struggling for wordsâstruggling to say anything. And, in the end, all she could manage was a furious, âHow dare you?â

His brows rose. What on earth was she on about? âHow dare I what?â

She was almost beside herself with anger. âYouâd barter a little boyâs love forâ¦a *date*?â

âThatâs not what I said.â

âThatâs exactly what you said,â she snapped. She hauled herself out of the car, slammed the door shut and glared at him for all she was worth. The emotions of the day bubbled to boiling point, and the steam had to be let out somehow. And here it came!

âYou arrogant, selfishâ¦toad!â she threw at him. âYou know what Harry needs. He needs a friend who cares for him. Thatâs all. Heâs not asking anything more of you than that. But you sit there in your icy, calculating world and you wonât let anyone near. And everythingâs bought or sold or thought of as payment due. Take Harry to Melbourne and get yourself a date for a ball you donât want to go to. Come and be a country magistrate and get yourself the next step up the career ladder. Buy and sellâand donât ever get involved. You make me sick, Nick Daniels. You make me absolutely sick.â

âShanniâ¦â

âGoodbye.â

And she stalked up the verandah steps without saying another word, while Nick sat stunned.

The front door slammed shut behind her.

And Nick wasnât able to see that, with the door safely closed, Shanni leaned against it and burst into tears.

CHAPTER SEVEN

âMessed up your love life, have you?â

âI beg your pardon?â Gowned and groomedâif you didnât count his non-smoothed hairâNick was ready for his Monday morning list. So was Mary.

âYouâre glowering like youâve just learned youâre having no holidays for a yearâand our Shanniâs looking the same.â

âWhat Shanni does is nothing to do with me.â

âFunny.â Mary tossed him an impudent grin. âThatâs what Shanni says about you. Weâll just have to see what happens.â

âMaryâ¦â

âHmm?â

âPut a sock in it,â he said dourly. And then he stared at his court list. âMary, why does it say Bart Commin is appearing first up? I thought I sentenced him to ten daysâ¦â

âWeâre appealing,â she said cheerfully. âRob organised it. Emmaâs going nuts.â

âHow can it be an appeal when heâs not being represented?â

âRobâs representing him.â

âA policeman,â Nick said carefully, âcannot lodge an appeal.â

âWhere does it say that?â Mary demanded, and Nick stared.

âIâ¦â

âThey often do,â she told him kindlyâclerk of courts dispensing wise legal advice to magistrate. âSurely you know that. The state has the right to appeal if they believe the sentence is too lenient. So we figured, what if the sentence is too tough? Whatâs the difference?â

âMaryâ¦â

âWhich it is,â she told him sternly. âBartâs screaming the place down. Shivering, sobbingâthe works. If you let him out then old Doc Harris will pop him in hospital for a couple of days; heâll sort him out and weâll all be happy.â

âIâll organise him to be shifted to hospital while he serves his time.â

âNot here you canât, Your Worship,â she said primly. âNot while heâs supposed to be in jail. Bay Beach has a country bush hospital with no secure wards. Heâd have to go to the Warrbook hospital, and heâd hate it.â

âOh, great. So now weâre into personal preferences.â Nick raked his hair in exasperation. âMary, heâs a prisoner. Heâs a convicted thief with a record longer than your arm.â

âHeâs stolen nothing but beansâand heâs a nice old man.â Maryâs voice was reproachful. âHe might be a drunk but we all like him. Go on, Nick. Have a heart.â

So fifteen minutes later Nick found himself reducing Bartâs sentence by six daysâand he found himself wondering just how much more heart was required in this job. And how much more he had to give.

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Harry required heart.

All day Monday Harry stayed in his mind, niggling like a bad conscience. And all day Tuesday.

Shanni was in his mind tooâbut there was nothing he could do about Shanni, he told himself savagely. Shanni didnât need him.

And he couldnât even begin to think that he might need her.

No. Concentrate on Harry. Leave Shanni to her queues of suitorsâ¦ He *had* to concentrate on Harry.

Tuesday night he walked over to the home and almost knocked on the doorâand then he walked away. He did a few miles of jogging on the beach, came back, stared at the darkened childrenâs home, swore at himself and then went back to his apartment above the courthouse. And thoughtâ¦

Shanni. Harry. Shanniâ¦.

Harry! Wednesday night he returned, and this time he knocked. It was too hard not to.

âNick.â Wendy met him at the door, her face wary. There were two little girls in the hall, playing with dolls. Wendy half opened the door but she didnât invite him in. âCan I help you?â

âI came to see Harry.â

âHave you, now?â There was caution in her voiceânot the open friendliness sheâd shown him last week.

What had Shanni said to her?

But Shanni, it seemed, hadnât said a word. The wariness was all Wendyâs.

âHarry had a lovely day on Sunday, Nick,â she said. âJust wonderful. But thenâ¦on Monday he sort of thought youâd come. Shanni didnât know if you would, I wasnât sure, so I rang the courthouse. Mary said sheâd have you ring back. Didnât you get my message?â

Yeah. Heâd got the message. It had taken him up until now to figure out what he wanted to say.

âIâm sorry.â

âHarry doesnât mind you not coming so much,â Wendy said. âWell, to be honest, he does mind, but he can cope. What he canât cope with is not knowing where he stands with you. Whether he has a friend or not.â

And there it was. If he committed now heâd be committing totally. This wasnât like a relationship with an adult that he could explain away at some time in the future.

Not like his relationship with Shanniâ¦

For heavenâs sake. Think of Harry. Harry! There was no way he could back out now.

âCan I talk to you?â he said.

âIâm here to be talked to,â Wendy said. She held the door open a little wider but still she didnât invite him in. âHarryâs in the kitchen. Talk here.â

You need to make a decision before you go one step further, her voice warned him, and he nodded.

âWendy, Iâm not talking about taking Harry on long-term or anything,â he warned. âI canât adopt him or foster him.â

âNo oneâs asking you to do that.â Her eyes were still wary, and she was reading his eyes. âHarry isnât asking that. He expects nothing of the world. But he needs a friend. Desperately. A friend whoâs constantâwho says Iâll see you once a week and who doesnât break that promise unless thereâs a darned good reason and Harry knows what that reason is.â

âOnce a weekâ¦â

âAny less than that and itâs not worth it,â she said bluntly. âHeâs just a baby, and heâs too little to remember. So, yes. Once a week or nothing.â

Nick took a deep breath.

And took the plunge.

âI can do that.â

There. It was said. The commitment made him take a step back. Heâd never made such a promise in his life. Butâ¦it wasnât such a bad feeling.

Except it scared him half to death. And Wendy saw.

âDid you ever have any decent relationships with anyone?â she asked gently. âWhen you were little?â

âIâ¦no.â

She shook her head, and the wariness was gone. There was only gentleness and caring left. âThen, praise be,â she said softly, âit seems Bay Beach has itself quite a magistrate. If you can get over thatâ¦â

âHey, I donâtâ¦â

âYou already have,â she said warmly, and threw the door wide. âTonight youâve taken the first step. Letâs see where we go from here.â

He still had to go to Melbourne for the weekend. It wasnât just ties, he thought dryly. Heâd only brought necessities, thinking heâd be back and forth all the time, so he needed to go.

But when he told Wendy and Harry thatâ¦

âI like Melbourne,â Harry said, sitting up at the kitchen table eating a bowl of chocolate ice cream and trying not to look as if heâd been given the world because *his* Nick had come to visit. Because *his* Nick was eating chocolate ice cream beside him. âMe and Daddy went to Melbourne every weekend.â

âDid you?â It was impossible for Nick not to hear the hint in the little boyâs voice. The longingâ¦

And for a whole five seconds he stayed strong. But Wendy was watching him. Daring him. Wendy who was Shanniâs friend, and Nick knew what Shanni would expect him to do.

Harry was watching, too, with eyes that said he expected nothing.

It was too much. A tougher man than him would break under this pressure.

âWould you like to come?â

âYes,â Harry said, so promptly that Nick nearly choked on his ice cream. For heavenâs sake, what had he done?

But it was too late to draw back now.

âIâll pick you up on Friday after work,â he said, casting a desperate look at Wendy. She grinned.

âSeeâdoesnât hurt at all.â

âI donât know how to care for himâlook after his legâ¦â

âIâll write you a list of instructions,â she said blithely. âBut kid-careâs a doddle. Easy as falling off a log. Iâll even organise a booster seat for the car.â

But there was one more problem and it wasnât Nickâs. âIâ¦I donât want to go in the car,â Harry said, and his voice was suddenly desperately anxious. He even stopped ice-cream-eating. Wendy sighed, scooped him up and placed him on her knee. She understood this fear.

âHarry, you and your daddy had a terrible car crash but that was a really unlucky time. Itâs not going to happen again.â

But Harry was torn. Nick could see it. He desperately wanted to go to Melbourneâwith his Nickâbut hours in a car with all of his dreadful memories was almost too much to face.

Okay, then. In for a pennyâ¦ âWeâll take the train,â Nick said.

Wendy almost dropped Harry. âYouâre joking.â

âI never joke,â Nick said heavily. âMoreâs the pity. Weâll catch the evening train on Friday. Will you be ready, Harry?â

âYes,â he said joyfully, and he wriggled off Wendyâs lap and burrowed his face into his ice cream as if it was champagne.

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What had he done?

He couldnât believe heâd offered. For the next couple of days Nick worked in a stunned stupor. Taking a tiny child to Melbourneâ¦ Giving up his car for the weekendâ¦

His friends would die laughing.

They wouldnât see, he decided. He couldnât take Harry to his usual haunts.

Where would he take him?

âYouâre quiet,â Mary said, as she gave him his Friday court list. Heaven knew whether sheâd heard of his weekend plans. Probably not, he decided. Sheâd have said something. But it was unlike this town to keep things quiet. For Wendy not to talkâ¦

Mary was waiting for an answer and he had to dredge one from somewhere. âItâs justâ¦Iâm looking forward to a weekend away.â

âIâll bet you are,â she said softly, and her eyes held a look he didnât understand in the least.

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He was running late. Since when did court cases ever run to time? he thought bitterly, grabbing his overnight bag and heading for the station with speed. He had minutes before the train left. Please let Wendy have Harry on the platform.

She did, and she had tickets in her hand as well. Bless her. The whistle blew as she handed over tickets, Harryâs overnight bagâand Harry.

âHave fun, boys,â she called as they disappeared into their carriage. And then she grinned.

âAnd have fun, Shanni,â she added, and she walked away with her fingers crossed.

Car three, compartment fiveâ¦

The train jolted into motion; Harry clung onto Nickâs hand like grim death and they made their way carefully down the corridor as Nick checked seat allocation.

âI wonder if we have the compartment to ourselves,â Nick said, and then he stopped.

He was at the right door, but there was already a passenger in the compartment.

It was Shanni.

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For all of ten seconds they stared at each other, shocked into immobility. In the end it was Harry who broke the silence. His smile, unused for so long, now threatened to split his face.

âAre you coming to Melbourne with us?â he asked her, deeply pleased.

âI am, butâ¦â Nick saw she was as flabbergasted as he was. âAre you going on the train to Melbourne, too?â

âYes,â said Harry firmly, hitching himself up on to the seat beside Shanni and wriggling his small backside deep into the leather. âI am. Me and Nick.â

âWhy,â she asked carefully, looking at Harry and not at Nick, âare you not driving to Melbourne in Nickâs car?â

âI donât like cars,â Harry said.

Silence while she chewed that one over. Nick put the baggage up in the racks and tried to think of something to say. Anything.

She was as stuck for words as he was, and when she finally spoke her voice was loaded with bitterness. âI think,â Shanni said carefully, âthat Iâve been set up.â

âNot by me,â he told her, and sat down opposite. Nickâs voice sounded angry, and Harry looked at him in surprise. Unnoticed, the train gathered speed and Bay Beach faded into the distance behind them.

âI guess I could always get off at the next stop.â Shanni looked as if sheâd like to jump off right now.

Great. Butâ¦ Nick bit his lip and looked at Harryâs drooping face. Heâd looked so pleased! âWhy are you going to Melbourne? â he enquired at last.

âTo visit my Aunt Adele. Sheâs ill, and my motherâs worried.â

âI see.â

âExcept nowâ¦â She was deep in thought, not seeing him, and she was almost talking to herself. âMy family have been odd. Maryâs been telling me how worried Mum was about Adele, and Mum was sort of agreeingâonly not saying muchâand then when I said Iâd phone Adele, Rob said Emma phoned her this morning and she was miserable. Then Mary offered to buy me a train ticket. As the family contributionâ¦â

âYou think theyâve set this up?â Nick said. He couldnât see any other reason behind this, and he wouldnât put it past Mary for a minute.

âI wouldnât be the least bit surprised.â Shanniâs anger matched his. âJohn came around last night and Louise told himâright in my hearingâthat he wasnât welcome and I was in love with *you*! He drove off before I could reach him. I ask you. In love withâ¦*you*!â

She said *you* as if he was some sort of dung-beetleâand, despite his annoyance, Nick had to grin.

âWhich is ridiculous,â he said politely.

âWhich is ridiculous,â she said, and glowered.

âSo what do we do?â

âWeâre all going to Melbourne,â Harry said, pleased again now Shanni had stopped talking of getting off. âYou and me and Nick.â

âI imagine we can put up with each other for the journey,â Nick said politely. âYou never know, your aunt might be sick.

âShe might not be.â Shanni sighed, anger giving way to exasperation. âI guess I can shop.â

âWill you shop with me?â Harry asked anxiously, and Shanni managed a smile.

âHey, you and I shopped last Saturday. You havenât worn those clothes out yet?â

âNo, butâ¦â

âYou and Nick are having a boysâ weekend,â she told him. âYou donât need a lady.â

âYouâre not a lady,â he told her. âYouâre you.â

â*That* sounds the very nicest thing anyone has ever said about me,â she told him, still smiling. âBut flattery will get you nowhere, Harry, my lad. Itâs a boysâ weekend and I donât need anything to do with it.â

Which meant, as the train arrived at Melbourne, Harry and Nick prepared to bid Shanni farewell. Or Nick prepared to. Harry had other ideas.

âWhere does your aunty live?â Harry demanded.

âBrighton.â

âIs that close to where weâre going?â This was one bright kidâand he was certainly persistent.

Nick nodded reluctantly. âYes. Weâre going to St Kilda, which is on the way to Brighton.â Then, because it was the only polite thing to say, he added a rider. âWould you like to share a cab?â

âThat would be nice,â Shanni said, smiling at Harry but eyeing Nick with reservations. âAnd then separate directions. Right?â

âRight.â

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Only, once in the cab, Harry started to talk. Heâd been his usual silent self on the train journey, but now he seemed to sense there was some urgency about proceedings.

âWhat will you and your aunty do for the weekend?â he asked Shanni.

âIf my auntyâs sick then Iâll look after her. What are you

boys going to do?â

Nick shrugged. âIâm not sure. Weâll think of something.â

âWill you meet us for just a little bit?â Harry said, and suddenly there was the faintest tremor in his voice. He looked uncertainly at Nick, and his look said heâd suddenly remembered he didnât know this man very well. For all he knew, Nick could be planning a weekend doing very boring grown-up thingsâand Miss McDonald was fun.

âIâ¦â Shanni wasnât sure what her response should be. Sheâd heard the tremor.

âCome shopping with us,â Harry urged.

She glanced at Nickâand then glanced away again. âI may not be able to.â

And Nick sighed. He knew when he was being bulldozed, and he was being bulldozed now. It would make Harry feel more secure if he knew heâd see Shanni again, so there was no choice.

âIâll take Harry to one of the cake shops in Acland Street tomorrow morning,â he said grudgingly. âJoin us for coffee. If your aunt can spare youâ¦â

âOr if I can spare my aunt,â she saidâand looked at Harry. âOkay, Harry. I make no promises, but you just might see me tomorrow morning.â

There was no time for more. The taxi pulled up outside the address Nick had given, and she gazed up in stunned silence. Nickâs apartment was in a three storeyed block right on the esplanade overlooking the ocean. She didnât need to see any closer to figure this place had cost him a mint.

No wonder he hadnât been too impressed with his sea view at Bay Beach. He had his own sea view here, surrounded by city comforts.

âWow!â said Harry.

âDouble wow,â said Shanni. St Kilda was only ten minutes from the city and her auntâs place at Brighton was further out. It had made sense, therefore, for the taxi to drop Nick and Harry off first. So now she knew where he livedâand his obvious wealth didnât make getting to know the man any easier. They had even less in common than sheâd thought.

He was a lawyer and a magistrate and he was wealthy. He was a man aloneâ¦. A man completely out of her ken. She watched in silence as Nick handed payment to the taxi

driverâand then frowned as he demurred at the change.

âNo. The ladyâs fare is on me.â

âNick, you donât need toâ¦â she started, but he allowed no protest.

âItâll make me feel better to make sure youâre safely home.â

Orâ¦safely away from you, Shanni thought bleakly as the taxi did a U-turn and drove away from man and child. Leaving you to your precious independence.

Butâ¦why on earth did the thought make her feel so bleak?

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It wasnât only Shanni who was questioning feelings. Nick might have his independenceâsort ofâbut independence wasnât something that sat well with three-year-olds.

He showed Harry into the spare room. Harry looked at the enormous bed and his eyes stayed blank in a look Nick was starting to know. It was his withdrawal look.

âItâs a great big bed,â Nick said cheerfully. Heâd fitted his spare room with a double bed because most of his friends were partneredâspasmodically. âYou can sleep in the middle and wiggle all you want.

âWhere do you sleep?â Harry asked in a subdued little voice that told Nick he was in even more trouble than heâd thought.

âNext door. Want to see?â

He did, so Nick led the way, opened the bedroom door and heard Harry gasp.

âDo you sleep in that bed all by yourself?â

âYep.â Well, most of the time, anyway, and he wasnât going into that with a three-year-old.

âItâsâ¦itâs *ginormous*.â

âIt is.â Nick smiled and led the little boy forward. âItâs called a king-sized bed. Actually,â he admitted, âitâs two beds. Itâs so big I couldnât get it up the stairs in one piece, so I brought two single beds and joined them together. See?â He lifted the covers, Harry dropped down on the plush pile carpet and inspected eight legs.

âIt *is* two beds,â he agreed. âWhy do you sleep in two beds?â

âIâ¦I like room to wiggle.â

âIf we pulled them apart then we could have a little bed each in the same room,â Harry said wistfullyâand waited. His eyes

were still blankâas if he was afraid to hope.

That hadnât been in the plan. Sleep in the same room as Harry!

But Harry was looking at him with dreadful eyesâeyes that told him the thought of sleeping in a huge bed in a bedroom all by himself held nothing but terror. Oh, greatâ¦ Big choice here!

Soâ¦ âI guess we can,â Nick agreed faintly, and watched the blank look fade.

âYouâd like that,â Harry told him, and his eyes dared Nick to agree. âWe could talk in bed.â

âSo we could.â He hadnât thought of that, either.

âWendy says I have to go to bed at eight oâclock. Do you go to bed at eight oâclock?â

There was nothing for it. Nick nodded with all due solemnity. âNot usually,â he said truthfully. âBut this weekend I just might.â

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He did. In the end it was easier, because Harry couldnât settle. He lay and stared at the ceiling while Nick read him a story, and when Nick finished reading his eyes were just as firmly open as when heâd started. When Nick tried to leave the room he said nothingâjust stayed staring up at the ceiling with a fixed expression of stoicism.

Heâd been here before, the expression said. Strange place. Strange people. Strange shadows.

Familiar fearâ¦

And Nick, who remembered the feeling as if it were yesterday, couldnât bear it.

âI *am* tired,â he told Harry. âI think Iâll come to bed, too.â

âThatâd be okay,â Harry said, still stoical. He was so careful not to let his eagerness show, in case this wonderful offer should be snatched away again.

So Nick slid between the covers of his now single bed and stared at the ceiling himself in the half-lightâfor heavenâs sake, at eight it was hardly dark.

And, while Harry drifted firmly into sleep, Nick wondered what Shanni was doing.

And wondered and wondered and wondered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Coffee and cakes in Acland Street was an institution. The street had been the cake centre of Melbourne for generations, each shop vying to supply the most mouth-watering cakes and each shopfront more wonderful than the last.

Nick and Harry wandered hand in hand for half an hour as Harry checked every cake. Nick was content to do as Harry wished. Two weeks ago cake-choosing would have bored him silly, but heâd come a long way in two weeks. To give Harry pleasure was pleasure enough, and his mind had things to dwell on.

Finally Harry made his choiceâsponge cake topped with meringue, strawberries and chocolate. And he wanted a rather strange-sounding lemonade and lime drink tooâa lime spider! Nick gave his approvalâthis place had great coffee tooâand they settled on a table outside on the pavement like long-term friends,

âI like this place,â Harry said in a very muffled voice. His mouth was full of cake. He took a sip of his lime spider and thought about it, then paused and his face clouded. âI donât think my daddy brought me here.â He stared down at his cake and his voice fell away. âI canât even remember if he liked cakes.â

âHe loved cakes.â

And here she was! Nick spun around to see Shanni bearing down from behind. She was dressed in a lovely light linen dress, her hair was flying free and she was laden with shoppingâshe must have a dozen carrier bags!

âHi, boys.â She beamed her pleasure at finding them, dumped her bags in a huge pile and plonked herself onto a spare seat. âPhew. Harry, your daddy was the biggest cake-eater in Bay Beach. When the local school had its fÃªte he was first in the queue for the cake stall, and, by the look of that cake you take right after him. What a great choice. Can I have one, too?â

She kicked off her sandals, sighed with relief and beamed

again at the pair of them. âArenât I clever to find you? We didnât even make a definite time or a place.â

âVery clever,â Nick said drylyâthere was no hint in his voice of the lurch of pleasure heâd felt at the sight of herâand Shanniâs beam broadened.

âYou might at least sound pleased to see me. Harry, are you pleased to see me?â

âYes,â Harry said definitely. âI am. Nickâs bedâs too big. We had to chop it in half.â

âI see.â Her perplexed forehead said she didnât see at all but she was game to try. âSoâ¦tell me all. You chopped Nickâs bed in half. With an axe?â

âNo, silly.â Harry giggled and Shanniâs eyes met Nickâs. There was a message clearly writtenâcongratulations! Her smile was almost patronising, Nick thought, but he felt his chest expand a notch. His world had lightened just a little.

Or maybe a lot. He hadnât wanted to see herâbut now she was hereâ¦

âShanni, we think we might be bored now,â Harry was confiding. âAfter our cake we donât know what to do. Nick says we might visit a lawyer he knows who has a baby.â

âDo you want to do that?â Shanni asked.

Harry buried his nose in lime spider. âNo,â he whispered, avoiding Nickâs eyes.

Shanni smiled again. Goodness! A Harry ready to assert himself. This was something indeed. âI see.â Her eyes flew to Nickâs, gently mocking. âTime for a rethink, then, Your Worship.â

âIâll figure it out.â He signalled for more coffeeâhe needed it! âand cake and spider for Shanni, and when he turned back Harry and Shanni were deep in her parcels. Harry was peering into one parcel after the other, his whole head disappearing.

âTheyâre all clothes,â he said, emerging disgusted, and Nick grinned.

âWomen do that.â

âYeah, and men buy hair cream and silk ties. Bought your semi-trailer-load yet?â Shanniâs eyes flew to his unruly mop and he grinned self-consciously.

âWell, no.â This felt strange, he thought. Weird. Butâ¦good. To be sitting in the sun with a funny, bubbly lady and a kid who

no one wanted but who looked at him as if he knew everything. As if he liked himâ¦

It wasnât a sensation Nick had ever experienced, and he wasnât quite sure what to do with it.

Go with the flow, he thought. And try to keep the goofy grin off your faceâ¦

âHowâs your aunt?â he asked, and Shanni wrinkled her pert nose in disgust.

âShe isnât.â

That startled him. âYou meanâ¦sheâs dead?â

âSheâs in Adelaide visiting an ancient schoolfriend,â Shanni said bitterly. âShe left last week. Ill, my foot! Lying, conniving family. You wait until I get my hands on them.â

âIâ¦see.â He didnât quite. âSo you stayed in an empty house last night?â

âI stayed in a hotel.â She gave a beleaguered smile. âMy auntâs locked the place like Fort Knox, there are signs saying the house is guarded by the Automatic Shotgun, Doberman and Machete-Carrying Security Company, and I donât have a key. So I got to stay in a seedy, third-rate hotelâ¦â

âShanni, you can stay at Nickâs,â Harry said urgently. The conversation was confusing but he had one point clear. Shanni needed a bedâand he needed Shanni. The course, therefore, was crystal-clear. âNick has a whole bedroom he doesnât use and he has the biggest bed! Nick and me sleep in the chopped-up bed in Nickâs room, so you can have the big bed.â

âHeyâ¦â She was taken abackâand even more so when she glanced at Nick and found him smiling at her. Well, what else could he do?

âYes, Shanni, itâs free.â For heavenâs sake, what was he saying? It was as if his mouth was forming words without his head being engaged, but he couldnât stop himself. âOrâ¦â He just had a brilliant thought! âYou could have the chopped-up bed if you likeâwith Harryâand Iâll have the big one.â

âNo,â Harry said urgently. âYou and me have to sleep in the chopped-up beds, Nick. Wendy says boys donât sleep with girls.â

Neither they do, Nick thought resignedly, watching Shanni grin and seeing every last vestige of a controlled weekend disappear before his eyes. Neither they do.

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After elevenses Shanni went straight into bossy mode and they went rollerblading.

âBecause you guys havenât decided what to do, itâs up to me to organise something. I havenât been to the esplanade for years, but I bet they still rollerblade just like they did when I was here on teacher-training.â

âCan I go rollerblading?â Harry said, and Shanni nodded.

âWell, sort of. Itâll be rollerpushing for you, my boy, until you get that leg straight, but Iâll bet youâll enjoy it. Wonât he, Nick?â

âSure.â For the life of him, it was all he could think of to say. There was nothing for it but to agree.

So they dumped her gear in Nickâs apartmentââ*Great jumping Jehosophat!*â Shanni said when she saw Nickâs expensive white and chrome decor, and Harry chortled his agreementâand headed down to hire equipment.

âI canât rollerblade in my leg cast,â Harry said sadly, seeing the equipment on offer and looking down at his ungainly leg. âAnd I donât know how. Do I have to watch?â

He most certainly didnât.

âNo,â Shanni decreed. âI told you. Itâs rollerpushing for you. These are just the ticket.â And she motioned to the pushchairs beside the hire store.

âYouâre the navigator,â Shanni told him, belting him into a pushchair. Unlike normal strollers, this one had huge wheels and a high handle, built for parents who wanted to push children with speed. âYou say fast, and weâll go fast. You say stop then we stop.â She rethought that, and grinned up at Nick, who was too stunned to say anything. âOrâ¦we might stop. If we can. Itâs a long time since I wore rollerblades, and I donât know how good Nick is.â

âIâm good,â Nick said, affronted, and Shanni grinned.

âThere you go, then. Your Nickâs a lawyer, a magistrate and a rollerblade expert as well, Harry. What a man!â

And Nick knew she was mocking him but he was so far out of his depth that he couldnât care less. This was a day for putting pride aside.

For putting everything aside except the moment.

They rollerbladed for the day. With Harry before them they took a handle each and went flying along the beachfrontâwhizzing in and out of pedestrians and cyclists and dog-walkers as if theyâd been born on wheels.

âSlow down,â Nick said at first, but Shanni grinned and increased speed.

âWuss!â

And after that they didnât speak. Nick was totally befuddledâand there was no need to talk, anyway. The path was hardly crowdedâit went for ever all the way along the beachfront toward the cityâand their speed matched exactly.

Their movements matched exactly. When Shanni slowed, Nick slowed with her, anticipating every movement. When she turned, he turned. When a dog lunged toward them off its lead they braked as one, waited until the dog shot across their path and then scooted on again, Harry squealing with delight.

Nick watched her out of the corner of his eyes. Her curls were flying, her eyes were dancing, she looked alive and vibrant and free.

And gorgeous!

And Harryâ¦ The little boy was lit up like a Christmas tree. He sat bolt upright in his chair, his eyes were wide with excitement and he crowed with joy. Every now and then he looked up and grinned, and Nick and Shanni grinned back down at himâand then grinned at each other as he returned to the serious business of navigation.

Which seemed to be a simple matter of crowing, âFaster, faster, faster,â until Shanni flung back her head, her curls flying and she choked on a bubble of laughter and slowedâ¦

âHere, slave-driver. What did your last horse die of? Iâm about to leave my legs behind me at this speedâ¦ Nick, okay, I concede, I concede. Slow down!â

They slowedâbut not much. They left the beach and followed the bike-path until they reached the river, then slowed as the crowds thickened on the river-banks, but still they wove dexterously through. Still there were no words spoken. They knew what the other intended. It was like a sixth sense.

Or more likeâa combining of senses. Of becoming oneâ¦

It was like a marriage. Both felt itâyet neither could say.

And then they were on the banks of the Yarra, approaching the wide expanse of the river-bank gardens. It was the most gorgeous day and Melbournites were making the most of it. There were couples and families and jugglers and ice-cream vendors and dogs on leads, andâ¦

âEnough,â Shanni decreed. âThis is where we stopâor Iâll die of exhaustion.â

So they stopped, and they sank onto the grass, removed their rollerblades, lifted Harry out of his pushchair, nestled him between them and settled in for a late lunch.

Hot dogs. Ice-creams. Soft drink and more soft drinkââBecause Iâm so dehydrated I could drink a river,â Shanni declared, and then they lay back with the sun warm on their faces and watched the rowers lazily stroking up and down the river.

Or rather, Shanni and Harry watched the rowers. Nick watched Shanni.

âWhat?â she demanded, catching him at his gazing as she gave the last of her chocolate ice-cream a reluctant farewell lick.

âWhat do you mean, âwhat?ââ

âYouâve hardly said a word. You just watch me. Do I have ice-cream on my nose? Did my hot dog leave ketchup? What are you staring at?â

It was impossible to lie. âJust you,â he told her, and the look in his eyes made her blush from the toes up. Dear heavenâ¦

And silence fell again, but this time the silence was different.

They almost slept, only not quite. Because Harry was too excited and Shanni and Nick were too awareâ¦

As the day wore on they rollerbladed through the Botanic Gardens, feeding the ducks, checking out every nook and cranny, feeling the oneness of themselves as a unit.

And in his pushchair Harry finally slept the sleep of the exhausted.

And the absolutely content.

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As evening fell they pushed themselves home, back along the

esplanade. Still there was so little to say to each otherâbut this was no awkward silence. It was as if they hardly knew where to startâas if there was a great well of untapped sharing that they were not brave enough to tap for fear of starting a flow that each was somehow fearful of.

The rollerblade hire place was locking up as they reached it. The owner smiled as he saw them come, not angry in the least.

âNow, how did I know youâd be the last of my customers back?â He beamed. âIf I may say so, as I watched the three of you head off this morning it did my old heart good. âSee,â I said to the wife, âthereâs still love in the world.ââ He nudged his elderly wife and the two of them beamed with such goodwill that Nick nigh on blushed as crimson as Shanni.

âWhen will your leg get better?â the lady asked Harry, who, having just woken up, was lazily content to lie back and watch the world without fear. Normally a stranger talking to him would have made him shrivel. Not today.

âThe doctor says I might have to wear my cast until Christmas,â Harry said. âBut then itâll be all better.â

âYouâre a lucky little boy.â The lady smiled.

And so did Harry.

âI know,â he said proudly. âAnd Shanniâs going to sleep with us tonight.â

They left with Nickâs face burning, and Shanni in a bubble of laughter she couldnât contain.

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Then they ateâagain!âin a restaurant overlooking the beachâand thenâ¦

âWhat next?â Harry demanded. Heâd had a solid afternoon nap and was raring to go.

âNothing that requires legs.â Shanni groaned. âI canât feel my feet. Theyâve gone walkabout. Or rollerbout. This afternoon my body forgot it was no longer a teenager, but itâs remembering now!â

Nick couldnât agree more. He smiled at Shanniâat the pair of themâand he knew what would work.

âPictures, I think.â

âPictures?â Harry frowned.

âHave you ever been to the cinema?â

âNo.â

âThat settles it. Pictures.â

Which wasnât as easy as it sounded. Nickâs local cinema catered for adults, and Shanni checked out its main offerings and shook her head.

âNo chance, Nick Daniels. âMature audienceâ doesnât mean three-year-olds.â

âBut that means thereâs onlyâ¦â

âYes.â She grinned as they perused the advertisement board. âThereâs a choice of exactly one. Or one hundred and one. *101 Dalmatians*, to be precise.â

â*101 Dalmatians*,â Nick said faintly and Shanni chuckled and took his arm. Which felt weird, but very, very good.

âRomance and comedy and dogs,â she said. âWhat could be better? And fantasy to boot. Itâs just what this weekend is all about.â

So Nick sat through a movie heâd never dreamed of seeing. As a child movies hadnât been for the likes of Nick and, as an adult with his carefully acquired sophistication heâd have died rather than see such a show. But, to his amazement, he found himself chortling along with Shanni and Harry, and gasping as Harry did.

Then, as the dalmatiansâ deadly peril grew closer and Harry abandoned his seat and clambered onto Nickâs knee, it was entirely natural that Shanni should move across to Harryâs seat to stay closeâand it was also natural that Nickâs free arm should come around her shoulders so they could gasp togetherâ¦

Happily, evil was conquered, and one hundred and one dalmatians were consigned to live happily ever after. And, as Harry, sleepy, sated, and totally content, was carried out into the foyerâit was also natural that Nickâs hand should hold Shanniâsâ¦

âNick!â

The exclamation stopped them dead. It was a voice he knew only too well. Nick turned and there was Abe Barry, his head of chambers, heading straight for him. Rachel, Abeâs wife of thirty years, was right beside him, and both were smiling their pleasure. âNick! What on earth are you doing in town?â Abe demanded. âHow are you, boy?â

âIâm fine, thank you, sir.â Nick adjusted Harry in his arms and extended his hand in greeting. It was pumped enthusiastically, but Abeâs eyes were on his companions.

âThis is Shanni McDonald, sir,â Nick told him. âAnd Harry. Theyâre from Bay Beach.â

âYouâre settling in well, are you?â Abeâs keen eyes missed nothing. His eyes darted from Harry to Shanni and back again. âRead about that bit of drama in the papers. Damned business. Thought you said nothing would ever happen in Bay Beach.â

âI donât get to try the case.â

âBut otherwiseâ¦the jobâs turning out well?â His eyes were still questioning Shanniâs presence.

âIâ¦you could say that.â What else was he supposed to say?

âIâm very happy to hear it.â Rachel tucked her arm into her husbandâs. She inspected Shanni and smiled her pleasure. âHello, Nicholas. This is the kindergarten teacher you were held hostage with, isnât it? I saw your picture in the paper. What a dreadful experience. Andâ¦Harry, did you say? Is this your little one, dear?â

âHeâs ours for the weekend.â Shanni smiled and her smile hugged Harry all by itself. âArenât we lucky?â

âWhat film have you been to see?â Abe asked, frowning. This jigsaw didnât quite fit, and he wasnât a man who took kindly to gaps. âRachel dragged me along to see some fine-art film. Did you see that?â

âNo, sir. We saw *101 Dalmatians.*â

â101 Dalmatiansâ¦â He stared, confused. This wasnât the Nick he knew. âHave we seen that, Rachel?â

âYes, dear,â she said placidly. âWith the grandchildren last school holidays.â

âOh.â The elderly manâs bushy eyebrows beetled down, astounded. âSo we did.â And Nick practically groaned. He could see this story being all around the lawcourts within the week.

Butâ¦

âDonât you worry, my dear, I wonât let him gossip,â Rachel said conspiratorially, and started pressing her husband away. âNot yet, anyway. I can tell that things are too precious and too new to breathe about. All the best, my dears. Nick, Iâm so excited for you. Iâve worried about you so dreadfullyâ¦â

And she led Abe offâspeechless.

And so was Nick.

âIâ¦we should go home. Itâs time for bed,â Shanni said finally, fighting mounting colour. âI meanâ¦â

Her colour rose higher.

âI know what you mean,â Nick managed. âAnd, yes, I entirely agree with you. Itâs time to go home.â

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There was no trouble getting Harry to sleep. No trouble at all! He hugged them both, put his head onto the pillow and was out like a light before Shanni and Nick could move from the bed.

And then what?

Nick didnât know. This was unfamiliar territory.

Nick was so aware of Shanniâs body beside him he could hardly breathe, and he was so tense! Why, on earth? Shanni was just a woman. A country kindergarten teacher. There was no reason at all why every nerve in his body should be screaming its awareness of her.

But it wasâand she seemed to sense it.

âIâm tired too,â she said, awkwardly, it seemed, and she stood on tiptoes and gently kissed himâlightly on the cheek, as one would kiss a friend. âIâm going to bed. Goodnight, Nick.â

And she took herself off to his spare room fast, leaving Nick with the overwhelming impression that she was escaping.

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Which she was. There wasnât much sleep where Shanni was going. Shanni lay in the unfamiliar bed and stared at the ceiling. She had absolutely no idea what was going on here. Orâ¦ Maybe she did and she was just running scared.

She knew nothing about this man, she told herself desperately. He was totally out of her ken.

She liked country boysâboys who had family, who liked kids, dogs, horses, country things. She had a very clear idea of where her life was going, and it didnât include someone like Nick Daniels.

âHe wears designer suits,â she whispered into the night.

But he wasnât wearing one now.

She almost wished he was. Itâd make it easier. She shouldnât be so attracted.

Why not?

Because he was damaged goods! she told herselfâand there was another puzzle. Why did he seem like that? She lay with her hands linked behind her head and tried to figure it out.

Damaged? Most women wouldnât see it, she thought. Theyâd see the exterior. Theyâd see Nickâs almost breathtaking good looks. The wealth and position. His great smile and the sophisticated lifestyleâ¦.

They were all things that didnât interest her in the least.

Or maybeâ¦ Maybe she was a liar. Maybe the smile was important. The way he let his guard down when she least expected it and the way he grinned down at Harry as if they were co-conspirators.

Which they were. Co-conspirators in pain, she thought, wondering just how different their backgrounds were. If they were the same, Nick would never let her close now. For Harry, aged three, there was time to heal, but a man in his thirties, whoâd been taught the hard way never to let anyone close, was a different proposition entirely.

What was happening this weekend was miracle enough, she told herself fiercely, and she mustnât expect more. If Nick could give a part of himself to help heal a child who needed him, that was all she should ask.

But there was a part of her that was screaming for moreâdemanding more. It wanted a part of him for herself. There was a part of Shanni that wanted Nickâs love, and it would be content with nothing less.

âWhich is just stupid,â she said savagely into the night. âYouâll just break your heart down that road, Shanni McDonald, so you might as well forget about it. Right now!â

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And Nick?

Just through the wall Nickâs thoughts were as jumbled as Shanniâs.

Some things, though, were crystal-clear. He knew exactly what his body was telling him. He wanted Shanni like a physical ache, and that ache was almost unbearable. He wanted her, and he wanted her, and he *wanted* her. All day heâd wanted her. Every time she brushed his armâin the cinema his need had

driven him nutsâevery touch and every look and every faint scent of her was driving him to distraction.

Butâ¦she was a country girl. Sheâd have certain expectations he had no hope of meeting. What he wanted, he decided, was to make fierce, passionate love to herâto get this need out of his system.

But she wasnât his normal type of woman. He knew instinctively that she wasnât a girl whoâd accept a one-night stand.

And afterwards, if he succeeded in making love to her and she felt committed, no matter how plain he made it that he wanted no ongoing commitment, he had to live in the same town as her for another two years. Her sister was his clerk of courts. Her brother was one of the policemen he worked with.

Like it or not, he was Bay Beachâs magistrate, and he knew that making casual love to Shanni would mess that up like nothing else could.

So seduction? No. Out of the question.

Which shouldnât faze him, he told himself into the bleak darkness while Harry slept on contentedly beside him. There were women heâd been attracted to in the past who were unobtainable. Heâd never found it a problem; heâd simply moved on to someone else whoâd accepted him on his terms. Seducing country innocents wasnât his style.

This nearness to Shanni was only for this night, he told himself. For one night he had to keep himself under control and then get on with life.

Move on to someone more suitable.

Butâ¦ He wanted Shanni!

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âNo!â

The scream spilt the night, terror knifing through every last corner of the apartment and Shanniâs feet were out of bed and onto the floor almost before sheâd heard it. Whatâ¦

âNo, no, no. Donât hit me. Donâtâ¦â

She was out of bed, diving through to the next-door bedroom with the speed of light, shoving open Nickâs door and flicking on the switch so she could see.

No one was hitting anyone. Of course not.

Nightmares!

Harry was sitting bolt upright in bed, his face ashen and his eyes staring at some invisible spectre as if it was the most fiendish apparition imaginable. Nick was with himâholding the boy tight but making no impression on the little oneâs terror. He looked up as Shanni entered, and his face was almost as white as Harryâs.

âHe started struggling in his sleep. Sobbing. And now thisâ¦ Dear Godâ¦â

âNo!â

The scream was heart-rending. Harryâs terror was raw and real, and Shanniâs heart clenched in horror at what must have gone on in the past to cause this.

But this was now. There was no room for delving into the past. Nickâs attempts at comfort werenât working. This fear had to be faced and worked through.

And this was no time for gentle soothing.

She crossed to the bed, sat down facing Harry and took his rigid little hands in hers, forcing him to turn in Nickâs arms to face her.

Then she spoke, her voice strong and sure and authoritative. âHarry!â It was a stern commandâa voice to be obeyed. âWake up, Harry. Youâre having a bad dream. Can you see me? Harry?â

He didnât focus. The spectre was still there, no matter how tight Nick held him.

âHarry, look at me. Look at me now!â It was her best commanding kindergarten-teacher voice, and finally it seemed to get through. Her face was inches from his. She was right in his line of visionâputting herself between Harry and his terror while Nick held on for all he was worth. It was all he could do.

âHarry, look at me, please. Itâs Shanni. Iâm here with you, and Nickâs holding you. Weâre your friends and weâre here. No oneâs hitting you. Harry, wake up and *look*!â

And finally his gaze moved. It shifted just fractionally, but, instead of an unseeing gaze into distant fear, he focussed waveringly on Shanni.

The terror was still right behind her. She could almost see it, and she had to dispel it. Send it back from wherever it had come

from.

âThereâs no one here but Nick and me. No one else. Youâre having a bad dream. Thatâs all it is. A bad dream, Harry. No one is hurting you.â

Still the sense of disbelief.

âNickâs holding you and he loves you,â Shanni said strongly. âNick wonât let anyone hurt you. Will you, Nick?â

âNo way.â It was a low growl but it was almost a choke, and Shanni glanced at Nick and saw all sorts of emotions playing on his face.

There were shadows thereâbut that had to wait until later. Focus on Harry.

âYouâre with me and Nick. Harry, you have Nick and you have me and you have Wendy. We all love you, and we wonât let anyone hurt you. Ever. Do you hear me?â

Nickâs hold on his rigid little body tightened even more. Harry was now staring straight at Shanni, a trickle of sweat running down his forehead, and Shanni gave an involuntary shiver.

âItâs gone, Harry,â she said softly, holding his hands and not letting her eyes leave his, forcing him to keep looking at her. âWeâre with you. Youâre safe. Nick and I are right here. Youâre with grown-ups who love you. Thereâs nothing to be afraid of.â

âIâ¦â It was a wavering sob.

âNothing will touch you while youâre with us,â Shanni said gently, flicking an upward glance at Nick. âI promise. Thatâs what weâre here for. To keep you safe.â

Andâslowlyâalmost unbelievablyâHarry nodded. Shanni saw his body slacken within Nickâs grasp, the awful rigidity fading with the terror.

And thenâinstantlyâhis little body slumped against Nick, his eyes closed and he slipped back into the safety of sleep, leaving Nick holding him as if heâd never let him go.

It took three of four minutes before either of them moved. Shanni was aware that she was shaking. She was warm enoughâshe was wearing very non-sexy long flannelette pyjamasâbut Harryâs terror had left its shadows. It was still real and palpable in her heart.

She looked at Nick, and she knew he felt the same. And then some.

âHeâs safely asleep,â she whispered at last. âHe hardly woke up. Just long enough to be reassured. He probably wonât remember any of this tomorrow.â

âI couldnât get through to him,â Nick said, shaken to the core. âI tried.â

âItâs a trick you learn in kindergarten training,â she said. âNever be gentle with a terrified child. Be direct. Bossy, even.â

He gave the ghost of a grin. âYou were certainly that.â

âAsk my family. Bossiness is my speciality.â She rose, resplendent in her pink pyjamas with woolly sheep all over them, and Nick blinked at the vision she created. Amazing! âI guessâ¦Iâll go back to bed now,â she said. âIf you slip him down under the covers itâs my guess heâll keep right on sleeping.â

âYes.â Nick looked down at Harryâs mop of unruly fair hair, and his mouth twisted into a grimace. There was a part of him that really didnât want to let him go, Shanni thought as she watched. Everâ¦

Heâd been hurt himself, she knew, and she was starting to figure out how badly. Nick had been down this road before, and maybe there hadnât been a Shanni or a Nick or a Wendy for him.

âHeâs been hit in the past.â

âYes.â

âWere you beaten as a child?â she askedâand waited.

For a long minute she thought he wouldnât answer. This was a closet that had long been locked, she guessed, never to be reopened, and here she was probing where it hurt most. But if the closet stayed locked, what was inside could well stay there for ever.

âI donâtâ¦â He stopped, as if he didnât know what else he could possibly say. Instead he did as Shanni suggested, letting Harry slip down onto the pillows. He adjusted his covers, touched his hair lightly with his strong fingers and then turned to face Shanni.

This was ridiculous. He was wearing boxer shortsânothing elseâand he was bare-chested and felt naked. And she was rumpled from sleep, her curls flying everywhere, and she was standing before him in those ridiculous sheepish pyjamas.

And suddenly he had to tell her. He had to tell *someone.*

No. He had to tell *her*. Explain why it was impossible for him to love.

âYes,â he said harshly. âI was beaten. Badly. The last timeâ¦â

âThe last time?â

âThe last time my mother decided she wanted me. My stepfather didnât. He gave me a pretty bad time before I was taken away.â

How old were you then?

âSeven.â

It was as much as he could say, but she needed to know no more.

âNickâ¦â

âDonât you dare feel sorry for me,â he said roughlyâmore roughly than heâd intended. âThat was twenty-five years ago, and if Iâm not over it now I never will be.â

âI donât think you can ever be over something like that.â

âLike being mistreated? Lots of kids are.â

âLike not being loved,â she whispered. âKids can bounce back from a bad timeâbut if they donât think theyâre lovedâ¦â

âHarryâll be okay.â

She hadnât been talking about Harryâbut now she turned to look down at the little boy, following Nickâs gaze. Even though the king-sized bed had been split into two, Harryâs share of the bed still seemed absurdly large for one so small.

âI guessâ¦â she smiled and turned back to Nick ââ¦if you stay on his sideâ¦â

âHey, Iâm committing myself to nothing here,â

âYouâve already committed,â she told him. âYou know it. Itâs scaring you stupid, but you can no sooner walk away from him now than you could fly.â

âI canât adopt him.â Heck, what was she saying?

âI know that. Harry knows that.â Her smile softened, and suddenly her hands came out and took his. âBut it doesnât stop either of us from knowing that youâre committed to loving him. Right up to here.â She did her tiptoes thing againâbut this time she reached up and kissed him on the forehead.

âAnd we think youâre just wonderful.â Her voice was husky with emotion. âA voteâs been taken, Magistrate Daniels. The courtâs come to a verdict, and the verdict is fantastic.â

It was a gamble, and she knew exactly what she was doing. Shanni stood absolutely still, her hands still holding Nickâs, and her heart seemed to stop beating. The whole world seemed to

hold its breath.

Sheâd laid her heart on the line here, she thought dazedly. She could do no more than that. Nick might not want commitment but he had itâright here in his hands.

And he stared down at her with his dark, fathomless eyes, and she knew that his heart was torn, just as hers was.

But hers had come to a decision.

âNick,â she whispered, and her heart reached out for him. âNick, loveâ¦â

âShanniâ¦â

It was too much. She stood in his grasp, in her absurd pyjamas with her heart on her sleeve and all the love and compassion and care in the world right there in her eyes.

A man would have to be inhuman to resist something so lovely. So utterly, wonderfully desirable.

This was not sensible. But nothing tonight was sensible.

With a groan that felt almost like the breaking of chains, Nick took her into his arms and kissed her.

CHAPTER NINE

SHANNI had been kissed before. Many times. Starting from when she was about twelve or maybe even before. Mary had been right when sheâd told Nick the McDonald girls were desirable and boys were interested from the time they could walk. So she knew what to expect. Or she thought she did. What she got wasâdifferent.

It was Nick.

Sheâd felt this force fleetingly, in the car the night theyâd mock-kissed outside the farmhouse, but not like this. This was like a zillion volts charging right through her, starting somewhere about her toes, coursing straight through from her lips, into Nickâs body and back to her again.

This wasâ¦right. This was how it should be, she thought wonderingly. It was as if their worlds had been heading along two different paths until this moment, but now the paths had converged. Ended. Reached their destination and their destiny.

This was where she was meant to be. Shanniâs awareness of anything but this man had shut down entirely. There was only Nick, and her whole body was lighting up as if it was on fire.

Nothing like this had happened to her before. She couldnât believe she felt like this, and he felt it too. He must. Somehowâ¦she knew.

Nickâs hands were holding her body into his, pulling her up to meet his kiss, and she could feel the rough maleness of his chest beneath her breasts. Her hands felt the naked expanse of his back and she clungâand clung and clung.

Nickâ¦

Nick!

Dear heaven, she wanted him. Her thighs were on fire. Her whole body was on fire. There was a white-hot melt starting somewhere in the region of her heart.

Who knew where it had come from? How it had started? Who

knew?

Maybe it had begun with attraction and compassion and the fact that Nick was a man and Shanni was a woman and he was funny and gorgeous and like no one sheâd ever met before. But nowâ¦ It wasnât like that now.

It was as if they were cleaved together. Like magnet to metalâtwo forces irresistibly linked with a force neither had recognised until this kiss.

Nick!

Butâ¦ *Harry was in the bed behind them!*

The little boy was fast-asleep, night terrors gone. There was little chance he would wake nowâbut he was there, and he was in the only part of consciousness she was capable of raising.

Nick was aware of him, too. Almost as soon as the thought of responsibilities entered her mind, the thought was with him as well. He needed to say nothing. She could feel it.

She *knew* this man, and together they could not forget the little one. Never.

So he put her away from himâjust fractionally, but the force it took was unimaginable and the link remained, unbroken.

âOne momentâ¦ Not here. Butâ¦Shanni, love, wait.â

He moved swiftly to the bedside-drawer and she knew what he was fetchingâknew it and gloried in it, because this was right. Now! Now was right.

And then he was back, sweeping her up to lie in his arms, his eyes caressing her, making love to her without a single sound. Then he turned to Harryâs bed.

For a moment they gazed down together at the sleeping child, ensuring his sleep was as sound as they knew it must be. Their need for each other was urgent, but not so urgent they could forget how much this little boy needed them.

But Harry needed nothing. His face was calmly peaceful, almost smiling, and Shanniâs mouth curved into a smile to match. It was the smile of one who knew what it was to be loved.

âHe wonât wake,â she whispered, and it was a proclamation of love all by itself.

And then, silently, they left the room. Nick carried her into the adjoining room where the big bed waited, and he left the

doors ajar so they could hear Harry if he woke.

As Shanni had known Nick would. She knew this man so well. She was so close to him.

And she wanted to be closer.

âMy loveâ¦â

âHush.â Nickâs dark eyes gleamed down at her, desire flaring. It was too late to draw back now, and both of them knew it. It was too late for separation.

Shanniâs bed was before them, the covers thrown back from when sheâd left with such haste. Nick laid down his precious burden and then stood, looking down at her in the dim light cast from the street lights outside.

And all the love and desire and the longing in the world were in that look, Shanni thought lovingly. A man hungering for what heâd thought he could never have.

She raised her hands, pleading.

âCome to bed, my love,â she whispered. âCome to meâ¦â

But with a superhuman effort he held back, and heaven knew how. âShanniâ¦â Somehow he made his voice work, and, again, heaven only knew the effort it cost him. âAre you sure?â

Was she sure? How could he ask that question? How could she not be sure?

This was her man. Nick was her love and nothing had ever felt so right in her life before.

âI love you, Nick Daniels,â she said, and her eyes gently teased him. âI loved you even when you wore your horrid tie and I thought you were nothing but a city lawyer on the makeâand thatâs saying something. But now I can run my fingers through your hair and youâre a country magistrate who belongs with me, begorra.â She twinkled up at him but her smile was pleading. âAnd youâre the most desirable man Iâve ever met in my life before. If only youâll come closerâ¦â

âShanniâ¦â

âGet down here, Nick Daniels.â She seized his hands and pulled him down to her, and he was so stunned he almost fell. Full-length he came to her, his naked chest crushing her breasts under her crazy pyjamas and his body stiffening with desire as her fingers came up and raked through his unruly hairâ¦

With such tenderness he thought heâd melt with wanting her.

Dear God, he was on fire.

And so was she.

âLove me,â she whispered in the night. âNick, love meânow.â

It wasnât Nick doing the seduction. She wanted him as badly as he wanted her, and there was no possibility he could pull back.

The consequences of this night would just have to wait until tomorrow.

For tonight, there was only Shanni.

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But no matter how long the nightâor how wonderfulâthere was always the morning. The dawn saw Nick wide awake, staring up at the ceiling as if it had betrayed him.

By his side, Shanni slept on. His arm was around her, holding her close, and her nakedness and her warmth were still arousing him as no woman had ever aroused him in his life.

He thought she was the most beautiful, the most desirable, the most wonderful being he had ever met.

But he feltâ¦wrong. Trapped?

She must have sensed it. Somehowâ¦ Her eyes flew open, she smiled at him with that smile he knew and loved so much it hurt, and her fingers came up to trace the furrow between his brows.

âMy loveâ¦ Nick, what is it?â

The knowledge had been with him all nightânot mentioned until now. But it was time to speak and it had to be said.

âYou didnât tell me it was your first time,â he said heavily, and her eyes widened.

âNo.â She thought it over, still sleepy with love and warmth and happiness. âI didnât. Does it matter?â

âYes.â

She smiled again and shrugged. This was nonsense. âI canât see why.â

âShanni, youâve been engaged. I thoughtâ¦â

âYou thought what? And I *have not* been engaged!â That woke her. She pushed herself up on one elbow and glared down at him in mock indignation. âAre you saying thereâs something wrong with me because I didnât sleep with *John*?â There was such revulsion in her voice that he almost grinned.

âNo, butâ¦â

âBut what?â

âWhy me?â he said, and she stared down at him, her smile fading. The echo of his trouble shadowed her face.

And what could she say? There was only room for the truth. What was between them was too wonderful for anything less. âI guessâ¦I guess I wanted it to be special. The first timeâ¦â

âAnd?â

âAnd it was.â But her smile was now uncertain. âFor you, too?â

âOf course. But Shanniâ¦â

âI know itâs not your first time.â She smiled, teasing him. âOr I assumed. Unless youâve been saving your condom just for me for all these yearsâ¦â

âShanniâ¦â

âIâm not fussed.â She turned within his hold and kissed him lightly on the mouthâand his need for her rose so strongly within that it was almost overpowering. âWhatâs past is past.â

Only it wasnât. His past was always with him.

âIâm not what you want,â he said heavily.

Silence. Thenâ¦ âWhat exactly is it that you think I want, Nick Daniels?â Her voice was lowâhuskyâand somehow there was a hint of anger in it. âApart from you making love to me.â

âI donât know.â His arm tightened around her shoulders, involuntarily, catching her to him again. âHusband material, maybe?â

The anger was definitely there. She hauled herself out of his arms, sat up in bed and glared at him for all she was worth.

âYouâre kidding. You think Iâll be expecting to *marry* you nowâjust because Iâve slept with you?â

Yeah. Maybe he did think that. He blinked, flummoxed, but she was still on her soapbox.

âJust because I wanted it to be special doesnât mean I wanted it to be *that* special! So you can take that look of a trapped dodo right out of your eyesâthis minute! And make love to me again.â

âIâ¦â

âAre you refusing?â

âNo.â Hell, no! âButâ¦â

âStop thinking, my lovely Nicholas,â she ordered. âMen are always dangerous when they think. I said I love you and I do,

but loving you doesnât mean Iâm setting any trap. Iâm taking each moment as it comes, and so should you. So shut up, lie back and think of England. Do anything but think!â

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Only, of course he did think.

He made love to her as if there was no tomorrow, and at the back of his mind he knew just how desperately he was falling in love with this lady. Sheâd said she loved him and the words had exposed a hunger he hadnât known he was capable of. Butâ¦could he return it? Could he forge a tomorrow for them? He loved her, sure, but to be a part of a familyâ¦

They showeredâtogetherâand dressed and were waiting respectably when Harry woke. And still Nick thoughtâ¦

They took Harry to the zooâand decided meerkats were the most wonderful animals in the worldâand they laughed at the seals and gawked at giraffes and ate popcorn and lay on the lawns and soaked up the sunâand all the while Nick thought.

Could he take this further? If so, how far? She was so wonderful. This was so wonderful.

Could he let himself fallâ¦?

He had his whole life mapped out, and Shanni wasnât in it, but suddenly his life plans were looking pretty bleak. Shanni, on the other hand, was looking more desirable by the minute. She lay on her back on the grass and ate her ice-cream cone upside downâÂA feat Iâve been practising for a zillion years,â she saidâand she chuckled with Harry and told Nick he was *soooo* boring for choosing vanilla and choosing to eat his ice-cream the right way up.

And she found a T-shirt with a meerkat printed on the frontâand promptly bought an extra-large one for Nick and a very small one for Harry and insisted Harry and Nick put them on immediately.

So Nick was forced to buy her one tooâof courseâand they walked around the zoo in three matching, ridiculous meerkat shirtsâand then Nick saw a sign asking for sponsors to adopt a meerkat, and they promptly adopted one called Tim, because he had a sore foot and he was Harryâs favourite.

âHis birthdayâs next month,â the keeper told them. âYouâll

come to celebrate?â

âWe surely will,â Shanni said, eyes glowing, and Nick knew that, expectations or not, he was in so deep now he just might never get out. And he didnât know if he wanted to get out.

And then they caught the last train home, and life started again. Life as it was meant to beâ¦

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âShanni, Iâm engaged. Shanni, Shanni, Shanniâ¦â It was Louise, the next McDonald sister down from Shanni. She was standing on the platform waiting for them, and she was fairly bursting with excitement and news. She hugged Shanni, she hugged Harry and then, for good measure, she hugged Nick as well.

âI came to collect you myself because I wanted to tell you first and Aunt Adele hasnât been answering her phone all weekend. Where have you been? No matter. Shanni, Alastair asked me to marry him on Friday night, just after you left. Of course I said yes. Weâve been celebrating all weekend and thereâs a party happening at home right now. So you need to come right on out.â

Shanni looked helplessly at Nickâthis was just what she didnât need! But Nick just shrugged and smiled. Heâd been growing more and more quiet on the train journeyâand now this!

âGo ahead,â he told her. âItâs been a great weekend. My carâs here. Iâll take Harry home.â

It was a dismissalâkindly meant, but a dismissal for all thatâand Shanniâs heart sank.

âHey, you need to come, too,â Louise told him, but Nick shook his head.

âNo. Itâs a family party.â

âButâ¦â

âLet him be, Louise,â Shanni said shortly, fixing her sister with a look she couldnât ignore. She sighed, trying to take her mind off the expression on Nickâs faceâthe look that said he was back to formality. âBy the way, Louiseâdid you know that Aunt Adele has never been better in her life? That the story of her illness was a ruse to get me to Melbourne?â

âOhâ¦â Louise had the grace to blush. âWell, sort of. It was Maryâs idea, though.â

âWhy?â Shanni was *so* aware of Nickâs expression. Blankly

smilingâ¦ It was as if he was restoring himself to someone she thought had disappeared. But he hadnât. He was now remembering who he was.

Any minute now heâd put his blasted tie back on!

But Louise had regained her composure and was unabashed. She gave Shanni a cheeky grin. âMcDonald match-making, of course,â she said blithely. âPlus Mary thought you needed to get away, Shanni, and we thought you three might have fun. Did you?â

âYes, butâ¦â

âThere you go, then.â All was right in Louiseâs world and she had no intention of letting a guilty conscience get in the way of her joy. She beamed at the three of them. âShould Alastair ask Nick to be a groomsman to match you as my bridesmaid?â

âNo,â Shanni said, revolted. âLouise, donât be stupid.â

But Louise was incorrigible. âAm I being stupid, Nick?â she demanded, and peeped a smile at him. Nick managed a smile back as he lifted Harry into his arms and prepared to carry him out to the car park.

âI donât think Iâm groomsman material,â he said shortly.

âHow about groom itself?â

âLouise, butt *out*!â Shanni was practically speechless with mortification. Her family was impossibleâ¦

âI guess Iâm not that either,â Nick told her, and he gave Shanni a smile that was as impersonal as it was gorgeous. It was a smile that said the world was to be greeted with friendliness but held at armâs length.

âGoodbye, Shanni,â he said. âEnjoy the party. Harry and I need to go. Weâll see you around.â

Weâll see you aroundâ¦ The words echoed forlornly around the empty railway station and even Louiseâs smile faded.

âShanni, Iâll be at kindergarten tomorrow,â Harry said urgently from his safe haven of Nickâs arms. He was trying to keep his precious link with the two of them for as long as possible. âAnd donât forget Tim Meerkatâs birthday.â

âI wonât forget,â Shanni said, and she gave Harry a hugâand Nick was sort of included somewhere in the hug because, after all, he was holding Harry. âTimâs a part of our family. Weâve adopted himâso how can we possibly forget?â

But Nick said nothing. Shanni gave him one long, searching look as her heart sank still furtherâand then she turned and followed her sister.

Because Nickâs face told her she wasnât welcome to follow him.

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He was nuts.

Nick settled Harry back with Wendy, promised him heâd visit on Tuesday night and again on Thursday, left him excitedly telling Wendy all about his new friend, Tim Meerkat, and then tried to drive home.

He couldnât. He physically couldnât turn the wheels of his car toward the courthouse.

Shanni was with her family, and there was a huge part of him that wanted to be right there. Part of the McDonald clan.

Part of a family.

But if he took this next step then he knew he couldnât walk away. As he could no longer walk away from Harry.

Shanniâ¦

The car slowed. Heâd been automatically steering toward the farm, but now he turned off onto the coast road. Neither way, then. Not home and not to Shanni.

This was tearing him in two, he thought bitterlyâto separate from Shanni nowâbut how could he take this next step?

It scared him stupid.

He couldnât just leave it there, he knew. Her face at the railway station had been shocked into stillness. Sheâd taken it without flinching, but he knew heâd hurt her.

Of course youâve hurt her, he told himself savagely. You made love to her. And nowâ¦now she needs commitment. She deserves nothing less.

As she was committed.

Sheâd let him take her to him, he thoughtâsheâd let him love her, and all the love in the world had been written clearly in her eyes. Sure, sheâd said she didnât intend him to take things further, but Nick was no fool, and somehow he knew her as he knew himself.

Or maybe more so. Maybe he couldnât know himself as he knew Shanni, and that was one of the reasons he loved her.

Shanni had no ghosts in her past to rise and haunt him. No shadows that screamed *Keep your distance*âcommitment was a thing to be feared at all costs.

So he steered his car onto the headland and sat for hours staring straight out to seaâand staring right within himself, searching deeper than heâd ever looked before.

If he let himself take the love Shanni had to offerâ¦

Heâd be taking and taking and taking, he told himself bitterly. What could he offer a girl like this? He had no family, he had no deep well of love; he had only his own insecurities and needs.

And one of those needsâcultivated from the time heâd been able to recognise any world at allâwas the need to hold himself apart.

If he drove out to the McDonaldsâ home now, heâd be welcomed with open arms, he knew, and he also knew heâd feel so claustrophobic heâd want to run. Because theyâd expect things of him. Expect him to open his heart as Shanni had opened hers.

No!

Heâd hurt her already, he told himself. Hurt her maybe unforgivably. But if he didnât intend to take this loving further, then the time to move on was right now.

Butâ¦ Dear heaven, he had to tell her.

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âShanni.â

The hubbub was fading. Her family were still in party mode, but Louise and Mary were talking bridal plans, the men were out on the verandah talking âmenâs talkââor getting away from talk of veils and guest listsâand the younger McDonalds were drifting reluctantly toward bed. Shanni was inclined to join them. Her mother had been eyeing her with concern for a good while now, but Shanni had deflected her nicely. Sort of.

She knew her mother couldnât be deflected for ever.

âShanniâ¦â It was fifteen-year-old Hatty calling from the hall. âItâs your gorgeous magistrate on the phone,â she yelled, and the remaining hubbub died immediately.

All eyes flew to Shanni.

Her colour mounted. Drat her family. Drat them allâ¦ Nick

must have heard that yellâhe could have heard it in the next county at the level Hatty yelled.

Itâs your gorgeous magistrate on the phoneâ¦

There was nothing for it. With the eyes of her entire family following her, Shanni went to talk to her gorgeous magistrate.

âShanniâ¦â

And as soon as she heard his voice she knew what he intended saying. Sheâd known it from the railway station but until this minute sheâd hopedâ¦sheâd sort of hopedâ¦

Sheâd desperately hoped!

âNickâ¦â

âShanni, Iâm sorryâ¦â

She turned her back to the kitchen, blocking her family out entirely. âNick, can we talk? Privately?â It was an urgent plea but she knew already what heâd say.

âThereâs no point.â

âNickâ¦â

âIâve behaved like a rat,â he said heavily. âI should never have let you come near me. To justâ¦take youâ¦â

âWe both wanted it,â she said steadily. âI wanted it as much as you.â

âI canât take this any further,â he told her, and Shanni heard the pain in his voice and she wanted to slam the receiver down before the words were uttered. She knew what he was going to say, but she couldnât stop him. And here it came.

âYouâre a wonderful woman,â he said softly. âMagic. Shanni, you deserve better than me.â

âYou donât think I could be the judge of that?â She was fighting with everything she had. There was no room for pride here. There was only her love.

âShanni, Iâve been alone for a long time now.â

âToo long.â

âMaybe. Butâ¦itâs what Iâm accustomed to.â

âBut not because itâs what you want. Youâre afraid to be anything else.â

âYes,â he said honestly. âThatâs the truth, Shanni. But thatâs who I am.â

âYou wonât walk away from Harry?â Her voice rose, fear flooding through for the child, and when he answered she sagged against the passage wall in some sort of relief.

âNo, Shanni. I wonât do that. While Harry needs me Iâll be there for him.â

âAndâ¦if I need you?â She tried so hard to keep her voice strongâbut there was raw pain coming through and Nick must have heard it. His breath was raw with jagged needâa need he couldnât acknowledge even to himself.

âIâ¦I donât think you can,â he said at last. âI thinkâ¦needing me is really, really stupid thing. Because thereâs nothing I can give.â

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And, after that, there was nothing more to do than to get on with their lives.

Apart.

CHAPTER TEN

NICK spent the next four weeks throwing himself into work as heâd never worked in his life before.

He rearranged the courthouse. He set up a new filing system. He put in a new computer and sat up until after midnight every night entering data as if it was vital the thing was up and running a week ago last Friday.

He ignored the mayoral ball and suffered the consequencesâespecially since at least twelve people told him that Shanni had been there and had looked lovely and had danced all nightâ¦.

His court cases became protracted. He didnât miss a legal point and the local lawyers and police sighed and cut back their lunch-breaks and wondered how long this could last.

âBecause you might want to drive yourself to an early grave but I donât see why you should take the rest of us with you,â Mary said darkly. âJust because youâve messed up your love lifeâ¦â

âI have not messed up my love life,â Nick retorted, throwing his gown aside after a torrid little traffic case that heâd managed to stretch out to two hours of court time. âYou know nothing of my personal life and thatâs the way I like it.â

âThatâs the way you like it? Ha!â

âYou donât knowâ¦â

âHey, Iâm a sister to the other side of the equation,â she told him. âI can see both sides. So I see you trying to fill every available minute with work and I see Shanni going around with dark shadows under her eyes like she hasnât slept for a week.â

Ouch. That hurt.

It couldnât matter. Sheâd just have to get over it, Nick told himself savagely, and she seemed to be trying hard enough. And it was better to hurt her now than later as he tried to mould himself into something he could never be.

A family man.

âYou love her, you know,â Mary said conversationally, watching his face. âWhy not give in and admit it?â

He had. That was just the problem. Heâd admitted that fact to himself and then some. He did love her, and if he didnât love her he wouldnât be so darned scared of hurting her.

And he wouldnât know how much she deserved someone better.

There was still Harry.

Harry was his saving graceâhis time of peace. With Harry, heâd made his commitment. He was forced to spend time with himâforced to take every evening he could and head to Wendyâs to read him a bedtime story, or take him to the beach after work, or walk along the cliff tops, hand in hand, a peaceful silence between them.

It was a weird relationship. Nick knew Wendy was watching it with satisfaction and it perturbed himâhe felt her expectations of him were unjustifiedâbut Harry took him at face value and asked nothing more than that heâd be there for him.

He was content to give that much, and the less Harry asked of him, the more he found he was prepared to give. As the weeks wore on, he found himself automatically walking down to the childrenâs home each eveningâbecause Harryâs face would light up when he saw him. If he didnât arrive, there was no recrimination the next night, but Harryâs pleasure was intensified.

And so was the pleasure for Nick. To his astonishment he found himself thinking about the little boy during the dayâfiguring out what they could do that eveningâwandering past the book store, hesitating and then going in to choose a storyâ¦

Different stuff. Not like Nick Daniels at allâ¦

It helped fill the ache left by Shanni. The ache of knowing what he was missing.

But it didnât fill it completely. Nothing could fill that void, but he was accepting that the darkness of his void was there for ever.

âYouâve achieved a miracle.â

It was four weeks after the Melbourne trip. Four weeks after Shanniâ¦ Nick had finished reading Harry his bedtime story and

had emerged to find Wendy alone. For once she wasnât surrounded by children. She motioned to the coffee pot, waited until he was settled and then repeated herself.

âWhat youâve done for Harry, Nickâ¦well, it is like a miracle.â

âIâve done nothing.â

âNonsense. Youâve given him a friend.â

âHeâs been one to me.â It was true, and it gave Nick a shock to hear himself say it. A friendâ¦

He wasnât into friends. Orâ¦not friends like Harry. Not friends he loved.

âThen maybe Harryâs done as much for you as you have for him,â Wendy said gently, and watched his face.

âI donât know what you mean.â

âI meanâ¦until now youâve been as solitary as Harry. You donât need to be, you know. Itâs simply a matter of letting go. Releasing a part of you and trusting it to someone you love.â

And suddenly they werenât talking about Harry.

Or maybe they were. The feelings she was talking ofâ¦ It was crazy. Entrusting part of him to Harryâ¦ Heâd never do that.

But as he sat there, with Wendyâs calm eyes resting on him, making him think, he knew suddenly that he was wrong to believe he could never do it. Becauseâ¦somehow heâd done it already. Heâd given a part of himself to a child.

The thought was like a lightning bolt. Until now he hadnât been involved at all. Not one whit. Heâd so carefully cut himself free of all ties, but now, with Harry, he was involved, whether he liked it or not.

And with Shanniâ¦

It was fear, he thought suddenly. That was what was driving him. Up until now heâd figured it was consideration for Shanni that was hauling him backâworry that heâd hurt her more than he had already. Maybe it wasâpartlyâbut it was more than that.

If he took the next step to loving and something happenedâ¦

He wasnât ready. He was scared.

âHey, Nick.â Wendyâs hand came over his, warm and reassuring. âThereâs no need to have angst over this. Take this one step at a time. Youâve given Harry so much. Donât push yourself.â

âShanniâ¦â

âI guess Shanni knows you need space,â she said gently. âAnd maybe sheâs prepared to wait.â

He shook his head. âThatâs stupid. Iâm notâ¦â

âNot ready to talk about it? Thatâs fine by me.â She lifted his empty mug from his hands and moved across to the sink. And then her shoulders stiffened, as if she was bracing herself for something unpleasant. âBut we do need to talk about Harry.â

âHarry?â He stared. âWhy?â

âWe think heâs ready for fostering.â

âFostering?â

âHe canât stay here long-term,â Wendy told him, turning back to face him, trouble in her eyes. âThis is a temporary refuge for troubled and orphaned kids. Itâs not a stable home and thatâs what Harry desperately needs. Heâs been here too long already.â She sat again, facing him with eyes that were suddenly sad. It was as if she knew that Nickâs need was almost as great as Harryâs, but the little boy must come first.

âWe have a couple who are willing to take Harry on as a long-term foster-child,â she told him gently. âMaybe theyâll even adopt him if it turns out okay. Normally if a child is available for adoption we like to do it straight away, but in Harryâs case weâve hesitated. As you know, we didnât consider him ready. But nowâ¦â

âYes?â Why was his world suddenly bleak.

âWeâre still not sure if heâll handle adoption. We suspect he wonât, straight off. He distrusts the world, and he needs space. But he trusts you now, he trusts you totally, and if you were to keep the linkâ¦â

âHow do you mean?â

âI mean, if we move him to local foster-parents and you keep visitingâ¦then slowly back off. Not so much as heâll notice straight away, but just gradually cut backâ¦so that in two years when you return to the city heâs not bereft. Heâll have parents by then, and hopefully theyâll have taken your place and more.â

âIt sounds good to me,â Nick said, trying to keep his voice light. Trying really hardâ¦

Because it didnât sound good at all. His void was becoming a sickening chasm of emptiness.

âA few weeks ago Iâd practically given up on this happening,â Wendy told him. âI canât believe the change youâve

wrought. But now heâs content and heâs socialising and Harryâs social worker believes we need to move fast before he becomes too established. Too fond of me.â

âAnd of me?â Nickâs eyes met hers, steady and questioning, and Wendy nodded.

âYes.â

âAndâ¦is it supposed to hurt?â He closed his eyes. He couldnât believe the pain. âDoes it hurt you?â

âThatâs what my job is,â she said, striving for lightness. âIâm accustomed to this. Take them in, love them to bits while theyâre here, but then launch them out to their own families.â She smiled. âIâm accustomed now. Almost. And I have the rest of the kids to worry about. For you, thoughâ¦â

âI donât need anyone else.â

âNo?â She smiled and cocked an eyebrow and he knew she didnât believe him.

Change the subject. It was the only thing he could do. âWhen will this happen?â

âAs soon as possible,â she said heavily. âMaybe Monday. Tomorrowâs Sunday. Iâll talk him through it andâ¦â

âIf he objects?â

âHeâs three years old,â Wendy told him. âWe donât give him a choice. I know, at the moment, Harry wants to stay in this placeâwith you and with meâbut weâre not his long-term parents, Nick. So we need to stand aside now and let those who can love do their best.â

It was the right thingâthe sensible decisionâa path that would give Harry a chance at this lottery called life.

Justâ¦why did it feel so darned bleak? And, going out, Nick met Shanni coming in.

She stopped dead at the gate as he walked out through the door. Her smile slipped and then was carefully repinned.

âNick,â she said, smiling again, and there might well have been nothing between them at all. If he hadnât seen that tiny slipâ¦ âYouâve been visiting Harry?â

âYes. Of course. I promised.â

âGreat.â It was almost sarcastic, and the pain in her voice made him flinch. She stood aside so he could pass, and he should have kept right on going. Instead he paused. He couldnât help

himself.

âHarryâs asleep,â he said, and he sounded inane, even to himself.

âIâm not here to see Harry,â she told him. âWendyâs my friend, and itâs Wendy Iâve come to see. Sheâs upset.â

âUpset?â He frowned. He hadnât seen it. âWhy?â

âYouâre not stupid, Nick. Because of losing Harry, of course.â

His frown deepened. âI donât understand.â

âSheâs told you about the arrangements for fostering?â

âYes, but I thoughtâ¦ Sheâs happy with the arrangements. Itâs the right thing.â

âYou donât think sheâll miss Harry? After almost a year of trying to get through to him?â

âI thoughtâ¦â

âThat sheâs tough? Donât you believe it. She bleeds just like the rest of us.â

âThis is her job, Shanni.â

âYes.â Shanni nodded, her eyes bleak. âIt is, but thereâs not many who could do it. Wendy gives and gives some more. She takes in children, battered and bruised and from all sorts of backgrounds, she loves them, she fights to get through to them, and then, when she sees theyâre on their way to healingâwhen theyâre just at the point where they can love herâshe sends them off to long-term carers. She sends them away.â

He thought this one through and saw it. Saw Wendyâs need for the first time, instead of just his own. âI guess it must hurt at that. Soâ¦why does she do it?â he asked slowly. âOpen herself to hurt like that?â

âShe has courage.â Shanniâs voice tried to be light but it didnât quite come off. âShe knows sheâs the only chance these kids have of finding love. By hurting herself she gives them that hope.â

âI hadnât seenâ¦â

âNo,â she said bleakly, and for the first time she allowed her own hurt to show. âYou donât see, do you, Nick? You donât see there are others in the world who are just as fearful as youâbut who have the courage to open themselves to love.â

âIâ¦â

âGoodnight, Nick. Leave others to care. You just look after

yourself!â

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And how could he sleep after that?

Nick spent the night staring at the ceiling and thinking of every option under the sun. And, as dawn came, he knew what he must do.

He wasnât one of these people who could love and risk losing all. He had no place here. Shanni had been right when sheâd implied he had no courage. He didnât. He was a coward and he knew it.

Soâ¦there was nothing for it but to stop hurting people and get back to the city where he belonged.

Forget the ambition. It wasnât so important any more. Maybe facelessness and solitude were more important than a position as high-court judge.

But Harry still needed him.

So heâd come at the weekends to visit Harry while he was needed, he told himself. That was all. On Monday heâd hand in his resignation. Heâd give a monthâs notice and he was out of here.

For good!

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His intention stayed with him for all of the next morning. He stayed inside and tried to focus on legal journals but the pages danced before his eyes, meaningless and empty.

Wendy would be telling Harry about his new family, he thought. Maybe his new mum and dad would be visiting. How would he be taking it?

Who could know what the little boy would make of it? Wendy, thoughâ¦Wendy would be hurting.

And somewhere Shanni would be aching for all of them. Enfolding them all in her huge heart and taking their pain into her. The three of them whirled through his thoughts and gave him no peace.

Harry. Wendy.

Shanniâ¦

He was going nuts!

He was leaving.

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That afternoon he walked for miles, but it didnât help one bit. When he got back, the answering machine told him he had messages waiting, and the phone rang again as he walked in the door. For some reason, as he lifted the receiver, he had a sudden lurch of dreadâ¦.

âNick?â

âShanniâ¦â He didnât need more than one syllable to know she was in trouble. Something was dreadfully wrong.

So much for not caring. Ha! His heart twisted in fear. âShanni, what is it?â

âHarryâs not with you?â

âNo. Why should he be?â

âDear, Godâ¦ Nick, heâs run away. Wendy told him about the foster-parents and he took it on the chinâyou know, like he doesânot saying anything but just looking straight ahead. But looking like heâs blind. She said that Helen and Doug, his new prospective parents, were coming to see him this afternoon. That was all. Then one of the other children grazed her knee. Wendy took her into the bathroom to clean her up and when she finished he wasnât there.â

âThen, whereâ¦?â

âThatâs just it, we donât know,â Shanni said raggedly. âNick, weâve all looked. Everyoneâs looking. Weâve been trying to contact you for hours but I knew you wouldnât have him without telling Wendy. The police are here nowâRobâeveryone. Oh, Nickâ¦â

Her breathing was way too fast, as if sheâd been running. âNick, does Harry know where you live? Have you ever taken him to your place above the courthouse? We thought that was where heâd try to go.â

âNo.â Nick frowned, trying to make his fearful mind focus. Thereâd never been a need to bring him here.

âHave you told him where you live?â

âI donât think so.â His brow creased in concentration, thinking it through. âNo.â

âWeâve looked everywhere.â Silenceâand then he heard her breath draw in from shock. As if sheâd just had a dreadful

thought. âNo!â

âWhat?â

You remember that day in the kindergarten after the hostage thing. You told him where you lived.â

âI didnât.â

âYou told him you lived on Borrowah Mountain,â she said raggedly. âNick, Harry can see Borrowah from his bedroom window. Weâve searched every street in townâevery inch of the beach. But if heâs headed for the mountainâ¦ Itâs not so far to the start of the National Park. Nick, he could be in thick bush by now. Dear Godâ¦â

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEY searched for the rest of that day, and then for one of the longest nights Nick had ever known. Every able-bodied person in town and for miles around the district turned out to scour the mountainside, and Nick searched with them.

Shanni was asked to stay at base camp in case he returned, as Wendy couldnât leave her other charges, but the look on her face told Nick it was one of the hardest things she had ever done in her life. To stay still and waitâ¦

At least he could search, and Nick searched like a man possessed, but it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. One tiny crippled boy in rugged national park bushland, some of it so thickly forested that it took machetes and raw strength to hack a manâs way through.

Why had he ever said it? Nick demanded of himself over and over again as he bashed through the bush. Why had he ever told Harry he lived in such a dreadful place?

Shanni must hate him. But she couldnât hate him for it as much as he hated himself, he thought bleakly. He was hating himself enough for the both of them.

All through that long night, as he joined the line of searchers bashing their way in lines through the forest, Nick was calling himself every type of fool he could think of. Why had he told the child he lived in one of the most inaccessible places in the state?

Because heâd wanted to be inaccessible, he acknowledged, and that need for solitude was now exacting such a cost he couldnât bear it.

Andâ¦for what? A solitude he no longer craved. He was no longer independent, he acknowledged. His very self now depended on the welfare of one small boy.

And one woman.

When heâd turned up at search headquartersâa mobile police caravan set up in a clearing at the base of the mountainâheâd looked at Shanniâs face and heâd seen a terror matching his own

reflected in her eyes. For some reason Harry had spun his little self around her heart, becoming as much a part of her as he was part of him. If they couldnât find himâ¦

Pleaseâ¦ Pleaseâ¦

The same pain in Shanniâs eyes was reflected in othersâ¦ The policemen organising search teams. Team members. All Shanniâs family. The older children from the childrenâs homes associated with Bay Beach orphanage. Shopkeepers, mill workers, teachers, boy scouts, even the womenâs lawn bowls association, for heavenâs sake.

The lady bowlers were making cups of tea as if their lives depended on it and the fitter ladies were donning protective clothing instead of bowling whites and bashing through the bush with the best of them.

Every last person in the district was desperate to help, and Nickâs distress was reflected in their faces. One little boyâs pain, taken on by so manyâ¦

â*Any manâs death diminishes meâ¦*â

These people knew what it was to care, but that care came at a cost. A cost Nick was prepared to pay, and more. Heâd pay anything it took. Harryâ¦

But, in the enforced breaks the search coordinators forced him to take, it was Shanniâs face he kept coming back to. There was raw agony in her eyes and he felt such a twisting knot of helplessness and rage and fear that he didnât know how to hold it in. How could he face her after such stupidity?

Dear God, how could he bear it? He had to have someone to holdâand he was alone.

Because that was the way he wanted it?

No! At two in the morning his group was called in after the moon went behind clouds, and he felt so sick he wanted to retch. He lifted his hand and smashed it down on a tree stump, and then gazed helplessly at the graze heâd made on his skin.

These peopleâ¦they knew how to care and he didnât. Heâd told a baby that he lived on Borrowah Mountainâ¦

He closed his eyes in despairâand then opened them at the feel of someone touching him gently on his injured hand. Shanniâ¦

âNick?â It was a tentative whisper and the look he gave her

was bleaker than death.

What could he say to her? Heâd caused this hurt.

âYou donât need to speak to me,â he told her.

âThatâs nonsense. We need each other.â

âShanni, how could I have done it?â he demanded, his voice raw with despair. âHow could I have done something so criminally stupid? I must have been mad.â

âYou werenât to know it could ever come to this,â she said softly, and then, before he could say anything more, she wrapped her arms around him and held him. And held him and held him, as if her life depended on it.

And for one long moment he kept himself ramrod-stiff. It needed only this. He didnât deserve comfort! That she should try and comfort him when he was so dreadfully at faultâ¦

âWeâll find him,â she said softly. âI know we will. Nick, heâs here somewhere. Youâre not to blame yourself. Youâre here now for him, and togetherâ¦weâll find him. Pleaseâ¦â

And she held him close, kissing him softly on the hair, holding him like a child and pouring her love into him. She was willing into him a strength that, alone, he could never have.

And when they moved awayâinches, but enoughâthere was a new, steely determination between them that was an affirmation that the whole was far greater than the parts. Together they could face this, feeding each other strength.

âWe can find him,â Shanni said. âWe must. Together we must.â

âHe wonât come out.â Heaven knew what made him see it, but suddenly he knew. This thing that he feltâthat Shanni had given him. Trust. Love. Completeness. It gave him knowledge.

Harry was his child as surely now as Shanni was his woman. And Harry trusted Nick.

Things were suddenly blindingly clear. There was no chance of these searchers finding Harryânot if one small boy didnât want to be foundâbecause Harry was heading for Nick with the same single-minded purpose that Nick would feel if Shanni or Harry was in danger. He was heading for the one person in the world he trusted and he loved.

Wendy had told him new people were coming to see himâpeople he didnât know but who wanted to be his parents. So Harry had run, and heâd keep running. He wouldnât want to

be found by anyone but Nick.

All night Harry must have been trying to find Nick, but if heâd come to this point, where the road ended and the wilderness of mountain started, he would have gone nowhere but up.

His leg was so weakâso damaged. He couldnât climb strongly. In the dark he must have stumbled and fallen over and over. Heâd be terrified.

But if he heard people searchingâcalling, as each group had beenâwould he answer? No, Nick thought, seeing things with a clarity that he hadnât seen before. Harry was terrified of more than the dark. People hadnât treated him with love. They were things to be feared.

But not Nick. Whether he deserved it or not, Harry loved Nick.

The thought made Nickâs heart wrench so hard it must surely break.

âLetâs try this another way,â he said strongly, turning to the men who were coordinating the search parties. When the moon had gone behind clouds theyâd called in all but the most experienced searchers until dawn. Now Nick looked again at Shanni, seeking confirmation in her eyes, but he knew he was right. âAt dawnâ¦let me go up. With Shanni. No one else.â

âYouâd be lost in minutes up there, sir,â a coordinator told him, shaking his head. The head of the emergency services was hard and efficient, and the last thing he wanted was an extended search if the townâs magistrate got himself lost.

Nick thought this through. Of course they were right. He was city born and bred and, no matter how much he wanted it otherwise, he didnât know the bush.

âThen stay with us, but behind,â Nick said. âStay silent and let me call, without anyone else making a noise. Itâs my guess heâll be hiding. I should have thought this through before, but if heâll come for anyone, heâll come for me.â

The search coordinator looked at Shanni. He knew her. She was a local. One of them. âIs that right, maâam?â

And Shanni was looking at Nick with eyes that were clear and steady. The terror had receded. Her mind was back in gear.

As Nick had thoughtâthe parts were stronger than the whole. Sheâd gained strength with their love.

âIf Harry wants to be found by anyone, he wants to be found by Nick,â she said, her own thoughts crystallising. âI thinkâ¦I think Nickâs right. Heâs Harryâs only chance. And, because Nick doesnât know the bush, heâll also be able to see the path Harry might takeânot looking at the overall picture, like you and me, but at the logical way for a three-year-old. And, please, God, he just might do it.â

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So, at dawn, the mass of searchers were held backââWeâll give you âtil noon, sirâââand one small group of experienced bushwalkers were equipped to the hilt to accompany them. But they let Nick decide the course.

âIâm going straight up,â Nick told them. âBear with me. Iâm a dope in the climbing department, but then soâs Harry. So every time thereâs a decision Iâm going to ask myself what Harry would have done. And Iâm going to yell myself hoarse.â

He took Shanniâs hand in his hand and held it. Hard.

âReady, my love?â The endearment slipped out unnoticed, but it was between them, anyway. Acknowledged for ever, whatever this day held. They were no longer two. They were a man and a woman made one, in need and in love.

âIâm ready,â she said. She gripped him as if she couldnât bear to let go, and then she turned back to the searchers who had to stay behind but who were breaking their hearts to help.

âWeâll bring him back.â

âPleaseâ¦â

âNick will do it.â She looked at him, her eyes calm and clear and determined. âI know it. He loves Harry.â

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And three hours and twenty minutes later, hoarse from calling and over five hundred yards, as the crow flies, straight up the mountain, Nick called for the thousandth time and thought he heard a faint response.

He stopped dead. The tension in Shanniâs hand was tangibleâdear God, pleaseâ¦

The group behind them also stopped. Theyâd heard it, then. It wasnât just him.

âHarry!â Nickâs voice echoed out around the mountainside and he and Shanni moved in the direction he thought the sound had come from. The rest of the group surged behind them, two of the searchers cutting a path but dropping back as soon as it was clear.

âHarry, itâs Nick. Harryâ¦â He didnât let Shanni goânot for a moment. âHarry, Iâm here. Harryâ¦â

And thirty seconds later they rounded an outcrop and stopped.

Harry was crouched motionless in the midst of a massive prickly grevillea that was three times as big as he was. The bush had been in the way of up. Heâd tried to crawl over it, the thorns had stuck from all sides and heâd slipped through and was wedged fast.

âHarry!â With a great shout of joy, Nick released Shanniâs hand and clambered up, ignoring thorns, ignoring pain, reaching the tiny, battered and scratched little boy and gathering him to his heart as if heâd never let him go again.

As he never would.

And somehow Shanni reached them, too, and they were sitting in the middle of the dreadful thorns and clinging togetherâthree and yet oneâand Shanni was weeping and so was Nick, but they were together and Nick knew this was how it was going to be.

For ever.

Â

âI thought you lived here.â

The team had got them down from their mound of thorns but were standing back in joyous silence, savouring success and letting them be. Harry was so exhausted he was limp in Nickâs hold, but his arms still somehow clung. His eyes devoured him. âI thought you lived up here all by yourself. So I came.â

âI donât live here, Harry.â Nickâs voice was a hoarse whisperâhe could still hardly believe he had the child in his arms.

âNot any more?â

âNo.â Nick had his face in Harryâs hair, but his eyes, over Harryâs head, were watching Shanni. Watching the love on her face. The tears. The joy.

The destiny.

âThen, where do you live?â It was an exhausted whisper, but he was still desperate to know. And Nick knew why he was desperate. It was because Harry didnât believe in happy endings. He needed to know in case he was torn away again and had to find his Nick.

So this time Nick knew what the answer had to be. The only answer.

âI live with you,â he said strongly, hugging him close. âFrom today, Harry. From today, I live with you. And with Shanni, if sheâll have me.â

âShanniâ¦â Harry twisted his face around to see and she was right there, all the love in the world shining from her eyes.

âWendy told you you needed a mummy and a daddyâright?â Nick asked, and he looked at Shanni again and saw her watching Harryâwith such a lookâand his heart twisted with such love that he didnât think he could bear it.

âMmm.â

âHow would you feel if that was Shanni and me? If we were your mummy and daddy.â

Harry stiffened in Nickâs hold. He pushed his head back and gazed into Nickâs face, searching. This little one had been told lies before.

âYouâd be my daddy?â

Heck, all he wanted was to burst into tears. Instead he made his voice gruff and deep and magistrate-like. Definite.

âIf you want me. Thatâs what I want. More than anything in the world.â

âWhy?â

There it was. The simple questionâwith the simple answer.

âBecause I love you,â Nick said strongly, and his spare arm came out and held Shanni to him as well. She hugged him backâhugged both of themâher eyes glistening with tears and all the love she possessed shining in her face.

âBecause I love you and I love Shanni,â he said. âI love you both with all my heart. And I figureâ¦if Iâm to come down from my mountain, what better reason could a man have than thatâto come down for love?â

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It was mid-afternoon.

Harry had been checked over medically, had been pronounced one very lucky young man; his scratches and bruises had been anointed; heâd been fed, cuddled, put to bed and cuddled some more until heâd fallen fast asleep from sheer exhaustion.

It was his last sleep in this bed, Nick had told him. When he woke theyâd move his belongings to where he belonged. With Nick.

And now Wendy was watching over him one last time, her joy tinged with sadness. âIâm getting too old for this,â she said as she watched Nick and Shanni cluck over their little one. âItâs time I moved on. Maybe took a chance at permanent fostering.â

âLoving and letting go isnât something you can do for ever,â Shanni said softly, watching her friendâs face, and Nick could only agree.

Loving and letting go? No! Heâd only just learned to love, and he intended to hold.

Somehow he forced himself to focus on Wendy. âCan you do that? Move to permanent fostering?â he asked, and Wendy nodded.

âSoon.â She smiled as one of her charges peeped in, holding up a scratched finger for inspection and sympathy. She beckoned her in, lifted the little girl and hugged her hard, then turned back to gaze down at Harry. âSome children have the capacity to break you up. But now and then thereâs a happy ending that makes it fine. Like you and Shanni and Harryâ¦ Go on, you two. Go and sort out your future while I watch over your baby.â

And she stayed with Harry and watched as Nick led Shanni outside.

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They didnât speak. As if of one accord they made their way to Nickâs car and Nick drove the short way to the beach. He stopped the motor and for a long moment sat looking out to sea.

Shanni sat silent. She knew exactly what was happening. Nick was saying goodbye to something heâd never wanted in the past

but heâd learned to guard as if it was the most important thing in the world. And nowâ¦he was saying farewell to solitude for ever.

And then he turned to Shanni. His love.

His face was tense, she thought. Unsure of what was to come.

âShanni, when I said back thereâ¦to Harryâ¦that weâ¦â he faltered.

Her heart lurched. No! Maybe she was wrong. Maybe, even now, he wanted to back away.

âI know, Nick,â she said heavily. âYou didnât mean it. Or if you didâ¦â She fingered her hands. âBeing Harryâs parentsâ¦Nick, Iâm not staying with you just for Harry.â

âI wouldnât ask you to do that.â

She turned to him then, tilting her chin, a trace of the redoubtable Shanni returning.

âWhat would you be asking, then, Nick Daniels?â

And the answer was there, already written. Clear as day, only heâd been too blind to see it. Until this day.

âIâm asking you to marry me because I love you more than life itself,â he said. âYouâve given yourself to me with all the love in your heart and I was too blind, too stupid and too cowardly to return it. But I need it, Shanni. I need your love like Iâve never needed anything so much in my life. Youâre part of me. You and Harryâ¦

âMeâand Harry?â

âCould you bear to be a part of a family?â he said simply. âMy family?â

âYou and me and Harry?â There was a glimmer of laughter in her lovely eyes and she held out her hands and took his between them. âOh, Nickâ¦Nick, thatâs all I want in the whole wide world. You and me and Harryâ¦ Oh, my loveâ¦â

And then, as he took her into his arms and kissed her and the afternoon sunshine exploded in a mist of joy and love and desire, Nick thought that life could hold no more than it possibly did at this very moment.

He was loved, and he loved in return. Heâd reached the pinnacleâ¦

But his love was pulling out of his arms, and the laughter was still there.

âMe and you and Harry?â

âMmm.â

âItâs not enough.â

What was she talking about? Love?

âI think we should get this straight,â she said, trying for sternness but her voice was husky with love. âBefore we commit.â

âArenât we committed?â

âI want this legal.â

âAs legal as you want. Iâll sign anything.â He paused, his legal training screaming all sorts of warnings. Drat his legal training! For this moment he was a loverânot a magistrate. âWhat do you want me to sign?â

She chuckled, a lovely carefree sound that echoed around them as an affirmation of their love. Of their passing from dark to lightâ¦

âI want two dogs and a horse written into the contract.â

âTwo dogs and a horseâ¦â

âAnd four more children. At least.â

âFourâ¦â

âAnd Wendy and her foster-kids must be welcome whenever they want to stay with us.â

âIs this a marriage weâre arrangingâor a menagerie?â

âBoth.â She laughed into his eyes, he smiled back, and she knew she needed no legal agreement. She knew she had him in the palm of her hand.

âOkay, Your Worship, that about sums it up,â she said sweetly. âDo you still want to be a high court judge, by the way? â

âI canât see two dogs, one horse, five kids, plus assorted hangers-on in my city apartment. How long did you say your last judge stayed in this town?â

âThirty years,â she said serenely.

âThirty yearsâ¦â He took her into his arms and they might well have been married right at that moment. No vows could ever be more permanent than this. âThirty years, eh? It seems to meâ¦â

âWhat does it seem, my lovely Nicholas?â

âIt seems to me like thirty years is not nearly long enough.â

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A CHILD IN NEED

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